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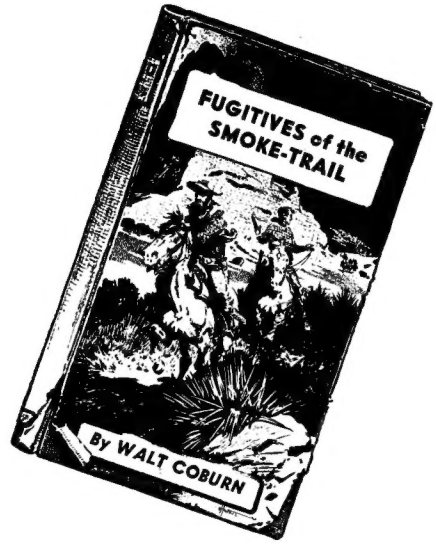

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INVADERS OF THE FORBIDDEN MOON

By RAYMOND Z. GALLUN

Annihilation was the lot of those who ventured too close to the Forbidden Moon. Harwich knew the suicidal odds when he blasted from Jupiter to solve the mighty riddle of that cosmic death-trap.

"CALLING the pilot of space ship X911!" Evan Harwich shouted into the radio transmitter of his little Interplanetary Patrol Boat. "Good God! Turn your crate back, you crazy fool! Don't you know you're headed right into the danger zone of Jupiter's Forbidden Moon? You'll get yourself burned to a crisp in another few seconds if you don't turn back. . . ."

Evan Harwich's growling voice was almost shrill at the end. His police duties patrolling the vicinity of Io, innermost of Jupiter's larger satellites, rarely developed moments as tense as this. Most other pilots had brains enough to give the Forbidden Moon a wide berth. And for excellent if mysterious reasons!

Yet the craft ahead, a sleek new job with the identification number X911 painted on its conning tower, kept steadily on. Its slim hull, which betrayed an experimental look, was pointed straight at the threatening greyish disc of Io, the one world in the solar system which no exploring ship of the void had ever reached—intact!

Almost everybody among the inhabited

spheres knew about the dangers of the desolate Forbidden Moon. Ever since the colonial empire of Earth had been extended to the region of Jupiter and his numerous satellites, Io had been a grim menace; sure destruction to any rocket that approached within five thousand miles of its dreary, almost airless surface.

Nobody seemed to know just why this was true; but some scientists claimed that somehow there was an invisible layer or shell all around Io; an immense blanket of strange energy or force that fused and blasted the metal hulls of all ether craft that ran into its insidious web.

Tensely and helplessly Evan Harwich watched, as the ship ahead continued on its way toward what seemed sure catastrophe. No danger in front of the recklessly piloted craft could be seen, of course. Five thousand miles of clear, cold vacuum was all that was visible between it and Io. But since this region held concealed in it all the potential violence of a hair-triggered trap, ready to unleash a flaming death that involved unknown physical laws and principles, maybe it wasn't just plain vacuum after all!

With dogged persistence Harwich kept yelling futile warnings into his radio. His shouts and curses were unheeded, and no answer was given. He knew what was going to happen in another second. There would be a burst of dazzling white fire all around the rocket of this foolhardy pilot he had tried to save from suicide. Metal would drip and sparkle in the absolute zero of space. In just another instant. . . .

Harwich swung his patrol boat aside, not caring to end his own life. But he kept watching the X911 from the side-ports of his cabin.

And now, something quite different from what he had expected was taking place. Suddenly the apparently doomed ship was enveloped in a bluish halo which seemed to emanate from a great helix or spiral of metal that wrapped its hull!

Immediately afterward, as the X911 entered definitely into the zone of destruction around Io, great white sparks lanced dazzlingly through the blue halo. It was as though the latter was fighting back those gigantic, unknown forces that had seemed to make the Forbidden Moon forever inviolable. It was as though the halo was keeping the X911, and whoever was flying it, safe!

Evan Harwich's slitted eyes widened a little in astonishment and hope. "Dammit!" he grumbled happily. "That idiot's got some kind of new invention that's protecting him! Maybe the Forbidden Moon is going to be reached and explored after all!"

A second more that weird conflict of hidden forces continued. Watching it was like watching a race, on which you have staked everything you own. Visibly, that daredevil space ship seemed to slow, as if resisted by a tangible medium. For an agonizing instant of suspense, Harwich saw those wicked sparks brighten in the X911's bluish aura. Then the latter dimmed, flickered, went out!

As if angry demons were waiting to pounce, destruction struck—quicker than a lightning bolt.

IF there had been any humor in the situation before, it was gone now utterly! The patrol man's lips dropped apart in sheer awe. The muscles of his massive, freckle-smeared forearms tightened futilely as he longed to help the X911's doomed pilot. In the pit of his stomach there was a sickish feeling.

Where that rocket that had dared the inscrutable enigma of the Forbidden Moon had been, there was a sudden, terrific blaze of light. The intolerable incandescence of it seemed to reach out to infinity itself, illuminating even the blackness between the distant stars of space. But it was all as silent as the bouncing of a bubble on velvet. No explosion, however huge, can transmit sound in the emptiness of the void.

The magnificent, horrible blast broke into a million gobs and sparks of molten metal—from what had once been a space ship's hull. Superheated gas from ignited rocket fuel shot out. Scattered far and wide, the white-hot fragments of the wreck continued on their way, following the orginal direction of the once bold X911 toward Io. Their speed increased gradually, as the gravity of the Forbidden Moon pulled them. The larger chunks, falling at meteoric speed, would bury themselves deep in the cold Ionian deserts.

The secret of Io had claimed another

victim, one who might have been victorious. But Io's mystery was still unviolated. Evan Harwich had seen other ships, disabled and unmaneuverable for some reason beforehand, go to their ends like this; but he was still not used to the spectacle, and to the unholy wonder it provoked in him.

Dazzled and almost blinded, he guided his patrol boat shakily away from the Forbidden Moon. There was cold sweat in his thick, black hair, under his leather helmet; and cold sweat too on his narrow, bristly cheeks. His movements of the controls were a trifle vague and fumbling with emotion, making his patrol boat waver a little in its course.

For perhaps the millionth time Harwich wondered: "What makes Io so dangerous? Dammit all, those scientists who claim that there is a deadly shell of unseen energy completely enveloping the Forbidden Moon, must be right! There isn't anything else that could explain the continual destruction of all rocket craft that come within that five-thousand-mile limit!"

Evan Harwich was ready to accept this much as fact. But beyond this, there was still a vast, unguessable question mark.

Was this shell of energy a natural phenomenon; or was it something planned, made, intended for a purpose? If the latter guess was right, who could have created such a gigantic screen of force? What kind of beings? What kind of science?

Io was an almost dead world, Harwich knew. Very cold. Very little water and air. Astronomers had taken photographs of its terrain through powerful telescopes, from the other moons of Jupiter. Very little could be seen on those photographs but deserts and grey hills, and curious formations which might be the magnificent ruins left by an extinct race.

Evan Harwich was far from a weakling; but cold chills were playing over his big body as he groped to understand the unknown.

His vision was clearing somewhat, after having been so dazzled by the incandescent blast that had accompanied the destruction of the X911 a moment ago.

In the feeble sunlight, so far out here in the void, Harwich saw a second rocket, leaving the scene of the disaster along with

himself. Evidently someone else had witnessed that weird demonstration of Io's destructive might, too!

Squinting through a pair of binoculars, Harwich read the obviously ancient craft's number. Then he snapped on his radio again.

"Calling space ship RQ257!" he grated into the transmitter. "Interplanetary Patrol just behind you. Pilot, please identify yourself! Do you know who was aboard the experimental rocket X911, that was just destroyed?"

A few seconds later he heard a dazed, grief-anguished voice speaking in response: "Yes . . . I ought to know. I came out to watch our test of the Energy Barrage Penetrator, which we thought would be successful. I am Paul Arnold. The man who was just killed was John Arnold, my father."

John Arnold! Yes, Harwich had often seen photographs of this daring, hawk-faced old student of the Forbidden Moon, in the scientific journals. He had been the greatest of them all! But there wasn't much to do for him now but shrug ironically, and report the nature of his death by radio to the Interplanetary Patrol Base on Ganymede, largest of Jupiter's satellites.

"I'm sorry, Paul Arnold," the patrol man told his informant in sincere sympathy.

"Thank you," the quavering voice of Paul Arnold returned. "And now, if you

don't mind, I've got to get back to Ganymede City. Dad's gone, but I've got to carry on his work."

HARWICH didn't meet Paul Arnold, the son of the dead scientist, face to face for more than a month, Earthtime. But on patrol duty out there in the lonely reaches of the void, with the stars and the roar of his rocket motors for company, he saw a good deal of the leering, greyish sphere of Io. It seemed to taunt him with its masked secrets, hanging so near to the tremendously greater bulk of Jupiter. But the Forbidden Moon told him nothing new at all. Through his binoculars he saw the deserts and hills and those supposed ruins. Near the equator was something that looked like a vast, pointed tower. But Harwich had seen this before, often. Something moved near the tower now and then, as on other occasions. But maybe this distant movement was only the shifting of clouds of dust, blown by a thin, frigid wind, in a tenuous atmosphere.

Then, back in Ganymede City, came that meeting with Paul Arnold. It happened at the Spacemen's Haven. Evan Harwich, on furlough now, was sipping Martian *kasarki* at the bar.

Presently a hand was laid on his arm. He turned to face a slight-built youngster, who could not have been more than eighteen. But his peculiar gold-flecked eyes were as distant and scared and bright as if they had seen Hell itself.

"You're Harwich," said the boy. "I'm Arnold. They pointed you out to me as the patrol pilot who reported my father's death. I wanted to talk to you. I don't know just why, except that you were there too, when Dad was killed. You saw what happened. And people have told me that you were a square shooter, Harwich."

Somewhat startled, but glad to know the youth, and more than willing to talk with him on the subject mentioned, Evan Harwich tried to smile encouragingly. It wasn't too easy, considering his weathered, space darkened features and threatening size; but he did his best.

"Pleased to meet yuh, Arnold," he said rather clumsily, offering a big hamlike hand. "I wanted to talk to you too. How about a drink and a quiet corner, where the crowd here won't be stepping all over us?"

They retired to a table in a screened nook. "Now," said young Arnold, "you've seen as much of the Forbidden Moon as anybody alive, Harwich. You must know that the energy aura around her is real and not a fable. You must know, too, that it couldn't be a natural phenomenon, since nothing in nature acts like it does. There's only one alternative possibility as to what could cause it! Even though Io seems so deserted, somehow there are machines there, functioning to maintain that shell of force! Right?"

Harwich nodded. Little glints of intense interest seemed to show in his eyes. "I've believed that for a long time," he admitted. "But those machines must be plenty wonderful to build up a barrage of invisible energy, thousands of miles in extent! Our scientists couldn't even begin to dream of doing anything like it! Even the principles employed must be a million years ahead of our time!"

"Right again!" the boy responded. For a second he cast a guarded, suspicious glance around the room, where Earthmen and leathery Martians were talking and laughing and drinking.

"The evidence can't be disputed," Paul Arnold whispered at last. "It might be that the people who invented those machines have been extinct for ages. But the mechanisms they created are still operating. There's superscience there on Io, Harwich! How much could we benefit civilization, if we could somehow find out what the principles of those machines are? How much damage might be done if those principles happened to fall into the wrong hands, among men? War and conquest—a whole solar system thrown into chaos—might result!"

Evan Harwich wanted to laugh scornfully, wanted to call the kid a dreamer of wild dreams; but the realization that young Arnold probably told the truth, made his hide tingle and pucker instead.

"Maybe you're right, fella," he growled.

"Of course I am!" Arnold almost snapped. "My father believed it for years, and his work must go on, even though the Forbidden Moon scares me plenty. You saw yourself, Harwich, that his Energy Barrage Penetrator was almost suc-

cessful. I've been trying to build another, with enough power to get through."

Harwich's lips curved, a nameless, wild thrill stirring in his blood. But after all, even before he'd left a great consolidated farm in southern Illinois nine years ago, to become a spaceman, he'd been an adventurer at heart.

"Do you suppose you'll need any help?" he asked simply, realizing that even as he spoke, death on a tomb-world might well be lurking in the background.

The question sounded like impulse, but it wasn't. Harwich had lived too long in the shadow of the Forbidden Moon's taunting enigma, not to want to take a personal part in any effort to penetrate its grim secrets. Besides, he had a month's furlough from patrol duty now. The thought of possible adventures to come made his nerves tingle.

Paul Arnold's eyes widened. "I almost hoped you would want to join me, Harwich," he stammered happily, seeming only to need the moral support of an experienced spaceman, to bring him out of the black mood he was in. "Shall we go to my laboratory?"

THE Arnold lab and dwelling proved to be one of the oddest that Evan Harwich had ever seen. It was just outside the great steel-ribbed airdrome that confined a warm, breatheable atmosphere over Ganymede City, the small mining metropolis of a dying world.

The Arnold lab was a group of subterranean rooms, beneath the desert. They were reached by a private tunnel from the City, and were hermetically sealed against leakage of air to the cold semi-vacuum of the Ganymedean atmosphere above.

Cellar rooms, vaults, not exactly modern but restored from some ancient ruin; for Ganymede had had its extinct clans of quasihuman people too, ages ago. A weird place, this was, a place of poverty, perhaps, since all of the Arnold resources must have gone into experimentation; but a homey sort of place, too, with its scatterings of books and quaint art objects and pictures.

"This is the Energy Barrage Penetrator, Harwich," Paul Arnold was saying in husky tones, as the two men bent over a great copper helix or spiral, attached to a maze of wires, tubes, and power-packs. "I rebuilt it here on this test-block from Dad's plans; with certain rearrangements, of course. But we need a new Gyon condenser, if we want to raise the Penetrator's strength enough to make our venture successful."

Evan Harwich nodded beneath the single illuminator bulb that glowed here, its rays glinting from the battered, patched hull of the space ship, RQ257, that stood in the center of the great room, under the airtight exit doors provided for it in the ceiling.

"So I see," Harwich commented with subdued eagerness. "Well, that's not so bad. I can buy a new Gyon condenser from one of the supply shops in town. I'm no scientist, fella, but they give us a pretty complete scientific training in the patrol service. Enough so that I can see that the Penetrator is going to do the trick, this time, with your improvements. And I don't think it will take very long to get things ready for a real trip to the Forbidden Moon."

The patrol man had hardly finished speaking, when a door, somewhere, groaned on its hinges. In the dusty silence there were footsteps, coming nearer through the series of rooms.

"Well, have we got company?" a voice boomed heavily after a moment.

Evan Harwich turned about slowly. Standing in the arched entrance of the laboratory chamber, beneath the ancient, grinning gargoyle of carven granite that formed the keystone of the arch, were two people. They must have just come in from town.

One was a man, as tall as Harwich himself, but much broader. He looked jovial, overfed, and just faintly sly. Harwich knew him a little. He kept a small printer's establishment in Ganymede City, repaired delicate instruments, and made loans on the side.

"Hello, Harwich!" the big man greeted loudly. "You look surprised to see me here! Well, I'm just as up in the air as you are, to find you around. How come? You see I've been financing Paul Arnold's researches since old John was killed. Has Paulie talked you into some part in the great miracle hunt on Io, too?"

"Hello yourself, Bayley," the patrol man

returned in not too friendly a tone. "Yes, I've joined up."

Harwich was a little more than surprised to see the fat printer here. He didn't like the setup at all. Not that he had anything definite against George Bayley. The latter had always seemed good-natured and honest, except for some elusive trace of insincerity in his manner, his voice, and his little squinted eyes.

Was this the kind of man for Paul Arnold to choose as a patron, particularly when he was in pursuit of the incredibly advanced science which must exist on Io? A science that might benefit the human race immeasurably, or might result in wholesale destruction and confusion, if it was wrongly and selfishly used?

Evan Harwich couldn't have answered yes or no to this question.

THERE was a painful pause in the conversation. Harwich found himself looking at the girl, who had entered with the big printer, and to whose arms the latter clung with a kind of bearish possessiveness. She was small and dainty. Her blonde hair, combed back tightly, fitted her head like a cap. She was wearing a plain but tasteful black dress with a white collar.

"Oh, I'm sorry!" Paul Arnold exclaimed after a moment. "Clara, this is Evan Harwich of the Patrol. Evan, this is my sister. I didn't tell you that I had a sister, did I?"

The girl only nodded slightly, and smiled a warm, friendly little smile. But why did the big patrol pilot find her more attractive than any other girl he had ever seen? Perhaps mostly it was those wistful eyes of hers, not gold flecked like her brother's, but clouded amber. They were mild and troubled and knowing. Maybe Clara Arnold's life, as the daughter of a martyred scientist, had made them like that. Harwich knew that he might conquer not only the Forbidden Moon, but the stars themselves, and still remember those eyes.

"Now we all know each other," Bayley boomed. "We're one big happy family—or are we?" He looked at Harwich significantly, a definite scowl now crinkling his heavy brows. "Harwich," he added, "we appreciate your company a lot. Only we are engaged in some pretty serious business here, and it doesn't allow us to take in outsiders."

For reasons of his own, Bayley was trying to get rid of the big patrol pilot. But Harwich was inclined to be very stubborn, naturally, and faint, pleading looks from both Clara and Paul Arnold, made him doubly so, just at present.

Harwich had the aspect of a very dangerous adversary in a physical encounter; his weathered features were far from beautiful, and at certain times he had a way of grinning that made him look like a good-natured devil with a hot pitchfork hid behind his back. He turned on that grin, now.

"What's in that package sticking out of your coat-pocket, George?" he asked the fat printer breezily. "It's about the right size and shape to be the new Gyon condenser we need. I was going to buy one myself; but seeing that you've already done so, we might as well go to work installing it in the Penetrator apparatus."

"Well, all right, Harwich," Bayley growled with some slight show of timidity. "As long as you're Paul's friend, I suppose you can stick around."

"Thanks a lot, George," Harwich chuckled, as the printer set the package containing the precious Gyon condenser on a work table.

The patrol pilot was almost sure he heard faint sighs of relief from the two Arnolds, as Bayley backed down. Had they come to mistrust him too, since he had been financing them? Did they feel more at ease because he, Evan Harwich, whom Bayley could never bulldoze, was their partner now too?

The spaceman wondered, and he couldn't help wondering something else. On Clara Arnold's left hand, there was a diamond gleaming. An engagement ring. Bayley's? The way the latter had clung to the girl's arm, it couldn't very well be anybody else's. Could Clara, quiet and beautiful, ever love the boisterous, paunchy printer?

The Arnolds were a strange family, anyway. The son was ready to sacrifice his life in an effort to reach the Forbidden Moon, where his father's ashes lay entombed. The daughter? Might she not be of the same fanatical breed? Might

she not be willing to marry Bayley, so that he would supply funds for their experiments?

For a moment, Evan Harwich felt a sharp, hurt ache, deep in his heart. But he fought it down. All this was none of his business. And from a heavy-glazed window slit in the ceiling of the laboratory room, a shaft of soft light from ugly Io, the Forbidden Moon, was stabbing down, appealing to his own adventurous nature.

Paul had slipped on a pair of lab coveralls. He tossed another pair to the patrol pilot. "Come on! Let's get started, Evan," he urged pleasantly. "We've got a big job in front of us, and remember you said we'd get through with it before long!"

TRUE to Harwich's predictions, the rearrangement of the Energy Barrage Penetrator for far greater power than the original had possessed, did not take really a lot of time.

Within forty hours after the patrol pilot's arrival at the lab, the task of installing the Arnold apparatus in the old space ship, RQ257, was complete. The tests of the Penetrator had been made, and judged as successful as anyone could have hoped for.

The space ship stood ready there in the laboratory room, a slender, copper helix wrapped around its hull.

"All set, eh?" George Bayley boomed jovially. "Got your emergency supply-packs loaded aboard, too, eh? But you won't need them, boys," he added seriously. "You've got everything in your favor. And in five hours you'll be back here with Clara and me, at the lab with a dandy story to tell."

Bayley seemed honest and sincere, now. Evan Harwich almost felt sheepish about the matter. Maybe he'd misjudged the big, bearish printer. Anyway, he watched his every move, during the assembly and installation of the Penetrator.

Paul Arnold was whistling a little tune of confidence and exultation. Harwich's pulses beat happily, his thoughts on the enigma of the Forbidden Moon, that now must yield to the new Energy Barrage Penetrator. Superscience there on Io! Unutterable wonders! Who could guess beforehand what the Forbidden Moon's vast screen of force was meant to bar from intrusion? But maybe they would soon know!

Only Clara Arnold showed worry. There was a slight shadow in her amber eyes, when she took Harwich's hand.

"I suppose this is only a preliminary test flight to Io and back," she said. "Not much dangerous exploration. But please be careful," she pleaded. "Please be careful, Evan."

The spaceman muttered a word of thanks. Evan. His first name. To have Clara Arnold use it like that might have given a new meaning to life. His heart was suddenly pounding very hard, before he remembered that diamond on her left hand. She was promised to George Bayley.

The girl and the printer retreated from the laboratory chamber, waving a farewell. The space ship was sealed. The great exit doors in the ceiling of the lab opened wide, and the air rushed out.

In another moment the RQ257 was shooting skyward. In the night, among the welter of stars, huge Jupiter and his many satellites shone down on the Ganymedean deserts. The nose of the ship swung unerringly toward Io.

THE RQ257, wrapped in its protecting halo of blue fire from the Penetrator, struck the Forbidden Moon's tremendous, invisible envelope of energy, squarely. There was a snarling sound in the ship's interior. White sparks lanced through cold space beyond the windows of the cabin, as two opposed forces fought each other. But the RQ257 bored on steadily.

"We're going to make it, Paul!" Harwich shouted through the reeking, dinning cabin.

"Of course we are!" young Arnold yelled back at him. "How could we fail!"

The two men were on the brink of success.

Then there was an abrupt, strident, angry, snap from the vitals of the Penetrator apparatus. Everything seemed to happen at once. The protecting blue aura outside the ship waxed and waned perilously. And whenever it waned, there was a grinding, crumpling sound, as of steel plating being crushed like so much paper in a giant's grip. Heat, and the cindery

pungence of scorched metal, filled the cabin.

Paul Arnold and Evan Harwich were frozen rigid with stunning, agonized paralysis, as strange energy snapped into their bodies. In the jolting, erratic motion of the wounded space ship, the two men were hurled from their feet like a pair of stiff wooden dolls.

Rolling and tumbling, his vision half blinded, Harwich saw the metal walls of the cabin buckle and redden with heat, as the craft floundered in that region of mysterious force and energy that heretofore had destroyed every ship that had attempted to reach Io.

There was another growl from the protecting apparatus. In a flash of electricity, the side of the bakelite case that housed the Gyon condenser exploded outward. At once the staggering Penetrator quit completely. Its last shred of protecting force was gone.

But that momentary hell had ended, too, with almost dazing suddenness. The grinding, snapping sounds had ceased. And there was only the heat and the stench of burnt metal, and the weightless sensation of free fall. That and the mocking stars.

Paul Arnold, panting, his face darkened and beaded with perspiration, clutched a bakelite handrail in one corner.

"We got through Io's energy barrage!" he shouted wildly. "We did that much, at least; and for a moment, when our Penetrator went wrong, I didn't think our luck would be even that good."

Evan Harwich leered back at the youth, from near the now useless apparatus that John Arnold had invented. "Yes, we got through," he grunted hoarsely. "The energy shell must be only a couple of thousand miles thick, with free space underneath, between it and Io itself. The Gyon condenser kept working raggedly just long enough to get us out of the danger zone, without being completely blown apart!"

Harwich didn't have to test the controls of the ship to know that they were useless, now. The rockets were silent too. The RQ257 was falling free toward the Forbidden Moon, still a couple of thousand miles beneath.

"But dammit, Evan!" young Arnold growled. "The Gyon condenser shouldn't have quit on us at all! Those things are tested for heavy loads of power!"

The patrol pilot was well aware of that. Clinging to the base of the Penetrator, he was close enough to see detail. The lights in the cabin had gone out, but the ugly effulgence of Io was streaming through the windows.

Projecting from the shattered bakelite box of the Gyon condenser, were two slender, bent wires that should have been joined together. It had been one wire once, but it had snapped in the middle.

The ends were faintly scorched and blued; but there was something else, too. They were bevelled off curiously, as if they had been notched.

"Cut with a file!" Harwich fairly snarled. "The wire was cut with a file. Then the insulation was rewrapped carefully so that all the evidence was hidden!"

The cause of the accident was plain. The wire had been able to carry the load of power easily enough during the tests; but under the additional load of fighting the Ionian hell-zone, it had burned through and snapped!

"Bayley!" Paul Arnold whispered in the ominous stillness that now pervaded the plummeting derelict of the RQ257. "He brought the condenser, you remember! Evan, I know you were careful to watch everything he did during the assembly and tests in the lab itself. He must have had the Gyon condenser at his apartment before he brought it to us. He must have doctored it there! He was planning even then to get rid of me! And when he found you around, he decided that he wouldn't weep if he got rid of you too!"

"But why?" Harwich growled in momentary confusion. "Why should Bayley want to get rid of you?"

IT was almost a silly question, as Harwich realized at once; but now Paul was answering it.

"It's simple," said the youth. "Bayley financed me after Dad was killed—yes. He watched my experiments and tests and studied my apparatus. He has a pretty keen mind. With me out of the way, no one but himself will know just how the Penetrator works! He can fix up another ship and come to Io himself without any competition! Anything he learns or dis-

covers on the Forbidden Moon will be his alone! Or so he thinks, anyway."

It was too clear now! Evan Harwich knew that he and the boy were tumbling helplessly into the maw of hell now. In a useless, derelict ship they were falling toward the Forbidden Moon! They were already within the gates of unholy mystery! Death seemed very close. Yet the cold anger that hissed in the patrol pilot's brain, made him determined to live, somehow, for revenge!

"We'll be smashed if we stay in the ship, Paul," he said fiercely. "So we've got to jump for it with our safety equipment."

Quickly and more smoothly than did the youth, for he was well-trained, Harwich got into his space armor. Next he donned two massive packs, one on his chest and one on his back.

The exit door of the cabin was jammed, but with his pistol the patrol pilot fired an explosive bullet into its hinges.

A second afterward, Arnold and Harwich crept through the rent, while escaping air puffed out around them. They leaped into the emptiness almost together. With the heat-warped wreck of the gallant old RQ257 falling beside them, they continued their plummeting descent. There were still almost a thousand miles to go, for the distance between Io itself, and the gigantic energy envelope that surrounded it, was perhaps three thousand miles.

Down and down, with only regulation spacemen's emergency equipment to rely on to avert being crushed on those greyish hills and deserts, rushing nearer and nearer. Even a thousand miles did not take many moments at that terrific speed.

The Forbidden Moon was like a sullen, silent nether world, with an atmosphere so rare that an unprotected human being would gasp and die in it in a few minutes! Even a man in a space suit could not hope to survive that desolation for long! Io seemed like a Pit now to Evan Harwich, an Abyss of Hell from which there was no escape! A place where no Earth being was meant to venture!

This moment was too grim to think of thrills. Helplessness removed that intriguing glamor utterly. And there was only savage determination left. That and smoldering hate of the man who had caused misfortune!

Presently, through the thin metal of his oxygen helmet, Harwich heard a soft, hissing, whistling sound. Gradually it grew stronger. The patrol pilot knew what it was, of course. He had entered the intensely thin upper atmosphere of Io, and the hissing was made by his own space armored body passing through those tenuous gases at fearful velocity.

The sound served as a signal for action. Again, though the situation was new to him, Harwich's training made his responses accurate. With a gantletted hand, he groped for the metal ring on the pack that bulged from his chest. It was ancient history when he jerked that ring, but sometimes, in emergency landings like this, on worlds that had a blanket of air, however slight, it was still useful. In another second the patrol pilot was dangling beneath a gigantic mushroom of metal fabric. He felt the firm tug of the shrouds. Deceleration.

He wondered vaguely why the fragile parachute did not tear apart in the terrific speed of his fall. But it was the utter thinness of the air, of course, here in the upper layer. Its resistance was so very slight. So there was time for velocity to be checked gradually, as the air grew denser, and its retarding effect greater with lowered altitude.

Paul Arnold had opened his chute too. Its vast top, a hundred feet in diameter, gleamed dully in the faint sunshine.

In a great plume of dust far below, the derelict space ship crashed. Fire flew as the force of the impact generated heat. But the wreckage was out of sight, and there was only a pit smoldering on a bleak, dusty hillside. The RQ257 was buried deep.

HARWICH and Paul Arnold landed several miles away from the grave of the ruined ship; for they had drifted with the thin, dry, frigid wind.

Their booted feet spanged painfully against the sand and broken rock, and they crumpled to their knees; for even in the feeble gravity of Io the impact had been heavy.

Harwich snapped on his helmet radiophone. Young Arnold's voice was already

audible in it, faint and thready and sarcastic.

"Well, here we are, Evan," he was saying. "The first Earthmen to set foot alive on the Enchanted World! I guess I got part of what I wanted anyway, didn't I? But with what equipment we've got to keep alive with, we might just as well be buried with the RQ257! Funny I'm not scared. I guess I don't realize. . . ."

His bitterly humorous tone faded away in vague awe.

Still lying prone the two men, looked around them, at the hellish, utterly desolate scene. The hills brooded there under the blue-black sky and tenuous, heatless sunshine. A rock loomed up from a heap of sand. It was a weathered monolith with weird carvings on it, resembling closely those left by the extinct peoples of Ganymede, that other, now colonized moon of Jupiter. A curious pulpy shrub, ugly and weird, grew beside the monolith. A scanty breath of breeze stirred up a little ripple of dust.

That and the stillness. The stillness of a tomb. Harwich could hear the muted rustle of the pulses in his head. Everything here seemed to emphasize the plain facts. The Forbidden Moon was a trap to them now. A pit from which they could expect no rescue. An abyss that was worse than the worst dungeon—worse than being literally buried alive!

It was like the end of things. Was this the kind of slow, creeping, maddening death that George Bayley, the treacherous printer, had planned for them?

Again fury steadied Evan Harwich's determination. Grimly he struggled to steady his nerves.

"Listen, Paul," he said quietly into his phones. "We mustn't ever let ourselves think we're licked! That's sure poison! The stuff we've got in our emergency packs will enable us to keep living for a while anyhow. We know Bayley'll come to Io sometime, with a ship fitted out with a new Penetrator. We know he'll be looking for the secret of the force aura of the Forbidden Moon, and whatever else there is to find. Maybe we can get ahead of him yet, if we keep on the move. Which way do you suppose would be best to go?"

Harwich asked this question because Paul Arnold, in his more academic study of Io, should know more about its terrain than he.

"You know the Tower?" Paul Arnold questioned. "The queer pinnacle, or ruin, or building, near the equator, on what is known as the Western Hemisphere? You must have seen it often when you were on patrol."

Harwich nodded. He remembered very well. Only a hundred hours ago, still on duty as a patrol pilot, he'd seen that pointed mystery from the void, vague dusty movement around its base.

"It was my Dad's guess that whatever miracles are to be discovered on Io, they will probably be located around the Tower," Paul Arnold answered. "But I was careful to notice our position when we landed. We're far north of the Tower now—a good fifteen hundred miles. A nice, long walk—especially when the normal air of the Forbidden Moon is too thin to be breatheable."

"Stop that pessimist stuff, and let's get started!" Harwich snapped. "We'll have to live very primitively, of course, but who knows what will turn up?"

They discarded their parachutes and started out, plodding southward, carrying their heavy packs. As if to save their energy, they did not speak much.

The hills rolled past, under their plodding feet. More fragmentary ruins appeared, and were left behind. Their boots sank into soft dust, as they marched on and on. At first their muscles were fresh, but tiredness came at last. And the miles which lay ahead were all but undiminished.

The tiny sun sank into the west and the cold increased. Night was coming.

"We'd better camp," young Arnold suggested wearily.

So they opened their packs, and took out the carefully folded sections of airtight fabric that composed their tent. It was part of the usual equipment kept for emergency purposes by those in danger of being stranded on dead or almost dead worlds. The tent could be hermetically sealed. Harwich and Arnold set it up carefully and crept inside. Air was freed from their oxygen flask, and the queer shelter ballooned out like a bubble.

They could remove their space suits now, and breathe, here in the tent. They

ate sparingly from their concentrated rations. Meanwhile a little pump and separator unit, driven by a tiny atomic motor, was busy compressing the thin Ionian air, separating out the excess of carbon-dioxide and nitrogen it contained, and forcing the oxygen into the depleted air flasks.

Once in the darkness Paul and Evan were awakened by a strange sound, eerie in that dead quiet, and very faint because the scant Ionian atmosphere could not conduct it well. But when they crept to the flexoglass window of the tent, they saw nothing unusual.

"I guess we're getting jumpy," Paul whispered nervously, his breath steaming in the cold, frosty air that filled the shelter.

"It looks that way," Evan Harwich returned reassuringly.

But after the boy was asleep again, he crept back to the frosted window to watch. He knew that there had to be something mighty on Io. The shell of force that surrounded the evil moon couldn't exist all alone. There had to be more. Something that lay back of it, went with it. Something that could easily be very dangerous.

Jupiter, so near to Io, was a gigantic threatening mass in the heavens. But its light was deceptive. There were so many dense shadows.

Did he see some of the stars near the horizon wink out suddenly, and then appear again, as though something big and nameless and sinister had momentarily blocked their light and then passed on? He could not be sure, and nothing further happened. To save his companion unnecessary concern, when nothing could be done about the threatening danger anyway, he decided to keep the incident to himself.

LONG before the dawn they were once more on the march. How many hours was the Ionian day? Something over forty. It didn't matter much.

When the daylight finally came, they had slept again, this time in their space suits, without bothering to set up the tent. Rising to his feet, Paul Arnold pointed suddenly.

"Look! An ancient road!" he shouted.

It was true. The highway ran there between the hills. A stone ribbon, covered here and there with drifted sand, which showed that there was no traffic of any sort now. The ruins along it looked a little less battered than those which the two men had previously seen, and there were vast lumps of corroded metal, too. Machinery in a former age.

"The road goes our way," Harwich commented. "We'll follow it."

Hours later, Paul Arnold offered an opinion. "Part of the mystery of Io is clearing up, Evan," he said. "The ruins around here. They're almost identical in architecture to the ruins of Ganymede and the other Jovian satellites. The evidence looks plain. There must have been a single great civilization once, extending over all the moons of Jupiter."

Harwich, thinking of, and hating George Bayley for his diabolical treachery, was only half listening.

"Yes?" he questioned.

"Yes," the boy answered. "And look at those dry ditches, and the big, rusty pumps! The valley here must have been rich, irrigated farmland, once!"

They were going across a huge bridge, now, made of porcelain blocks. It was a magnificent structure, magnificently designed according to intricate principles of engineering.

"What I can't understand is why all this country became deserted," Paul offered. "You'd think that people who could build things like this would never die out! They could conquer any difficulty that might come up, it would almost seem. Even if their world got old and worn out. After all, even Earthmen can make almost dead worlds artificially habitable again with airdromes, and with imported atmosphere and water."

This was another mystery. But it touched Evan Harwich's thoughts only faintly. Nor did he care very much when later Paul pointed out to him rich deposits of ore—outcroppings along the road. He'd seen them himself, and the tunnel mouths, too, of ancient mine workings. There were many fortunes to be won here, in costly metals, just as on the other Jovian satellites. But how could this be important, now, with death dogging their tracks, and so many other things

more important, to be concerned with?

Evan Harwich reserved his determination for what he knew was coming. The slow wearing down of stamina. Water he and Paul had a little of. And more could be reclaimed from the thin, dry atmosphere. It collected in the bottoms of oxygen bottles, when they were pumped full, condensed by compression. A few precious drops. You could drink it out after each bottle was emptied of air. Just about enough water to sustain life.

In the matter of food, you had to ration yourself so stringently that you caught yourself looking with longing eyes at the few, weird, bulbous shrubs and the scattered lichens, which were the only vegetation on this dying world. Only you knew that these arid growths would never be good to eat.

Those long Ionian days passed. One after another. Five, ten, fifteen. Harwich knew he was losing strength slowly. The inevitable was catching up with him. But those hard years in the Interplanetary Patrol Service, and the rigid physical discipline, had made him as tough as steel wire.

With the boy, Paul Arnold, it was not the same. He was very young, and not too robust. And he was slipping fast.

"What's the matter with me, Evan?" he would grumble. "All this desert isn't real, is it? We're not on the Forbidden Moon, are we? I'm dreaming."

"You're just tired out, that's all, fella," Harwich would answer in a tone that he would try to make reassuring. He would put an arm around the kid's shoulders, to support his faltering steps.

Big brother stuff. . . . Paul had plenty of pluck, all right, but there wasn't much else left in him. He was wearing out, mile by mile, staggering under his heavy pack.

EVERY resource was reaching its limit, now. Food supplies had dwindled away to nothing, at last. The little atomic motor that worked the air compressor and separator unit, was breaking down. It could hardly pump enough oxygen into the air flasks any more.

But there was nothing to do but keep on the march, anyway, in spite of handicaps. Evan Harwich felt as though he was going slowly mad. Brooding thoughts came into his mind constantly.

Clara Arnold. Where was she now? What had happened back there on Ganymede? What had George Bayley done? When would he come to Io, with the ship he would surely fit out with a new Penetrator?

What was Clara thinking? What if she knew her brother was alive on the Forbidden Moon, but slowly dying? What if Bayley told her that maybe Paul was still alive, adding that he himself was the only person that might be able to effect a rescue? What if he had finally used this means, this possibility, to make Clara marry him? She didn't love Bayley, the fat printer! She couldn't! And he wouldn't even have to promise to attempt a rescue—only suggest that he might try. Clara must be half crazy herself, thinking of her brother. After all she'd lost her father to the Forbidden Moon too.

The thought of demure Clara Arnold in the arms of that bulky, squint-eyed printer, who had shown his true colors at last, and proved his diabolical cleverness, fairly strangled Harwich. Maybe he had no right to harbor such an attitude. After all he hardly knew Clara. He only knew her haunting beauty and friendly amber eyes, with quiet wisdom and a little of the martyr in them—like her father, perhaps. But Harwich couldn't help thinking. It was only by exercising superhuman self-control, that he kept himself from turning into a raving maniac.

Supporting Paul Arnold's feeble, struggling steps, Harwich watched the sky like a starved, wounded wolf. Sometimes, in sheer, wild determination, he longed to claw at that cold, forbidding firmament, and climb out of that hell-pit of a world into which he had fallen. He yearned with a savagery beyond words to claw his way up there into space, to wherever George Bayley might be, and feel the fat throat of the man who had tampered with the Gyon condenser aboard the RQ257, squeezed between his hooked fingers.

But the frigid sky and the bleak, dying hills, and the weary miles, mocked all his hate-born desires. His numbed, aching feet could only plod on and on in this grave-like desert. Ruins, rusted machinery, silence, and cold that crept even through

the heavy insulation of his space armor.

Still, he could remember another thing. In the far distance to the south, was something wonderful and strange. Something that made the deadly and insidious energy barrier of the Forbidden Moon possible. Where the Tower loomed on the astronomical photographs of Io.

That night came at last when a streak of silver fire traced its way across the sky. It couldn't be anything but the flames ejected from the rockets of an approaching space ship.

Paul Arnold saw it too, turning his haggard face upward. "There he is, Evan," he croaked into his helmet phones. "Bayley's coming at last."

"I see," Harwich returned softly; his teeth gritted and his lips curling furiously, behind the transparent front of his space headgear.

They dropped down beside the wall of a ruin, to watch. The ship was coming straight in, toward Io. At its tremendous altitude, nothing but its rocket blasts could be seen at first. But then there was a sudden flare of bluish light. It had struck Io's force barrier, and that blue glow was the evidence of a Penetrator, functioning. The craft seemed to slow a little, as its pale, protecting shell of counter-energy fought back that invisible, guardian screen of the devil moon.

"He got through the force shield," Harwich growled after a moment. "We knew he would, of course, with his Penetrator operating right. Damn him!"

There was no more blue fire visible now; but the little silver-tailed path of rocket flame, showed that the ship was coming in safe and sound, its propelling jets working steadily.

Among the stars it turned southward toward that deepest enigma of Io. Toward the unknown scientific wisdom, which lay hidden somewhere near the Ionian equator.

"He'll get there in a few minutes' time," Paul whispered. "And I guess we won't get there at all. I'm sorry, Evan, that I got you mixed up with the Forbidden Moon. Me—I'm just about finished—now."

PAUL ARNOLD'S voice trailed away. Harwich turned the boy's glass-covered face up. In the light of monster Jupiter, he could see that it was blank and relaxed. The eyes were closed. In the quiet rays of the giant of planets, the youth looked as though death had already touched him. But there was a little frosty blur on the inside of the crystalline faceplate of his helmet. It showed that he still breathed.

Tottering a little himself, Harwich picked the boy up, pack and all. He struggled to put one foot ahead of the other, marching again toward the south, where the space ship was rapidly receding. Had his strength been at normal level, his load, bulky though it was, would have been light in this weak gravity. But Harwich was near the end of his rope, too. And so he moved on through that beautiful shadow-haunted, frigid night, where no man was meant to live.

Many times he had to stop and rest. After a short while, the atomic motor of the air compressor separator unit refused to work any more. Harwich tried turning the mechanism by hand. But this was slow, exhausting work.

He watched the luminous dial of the cold-proof wrist-watch, strapped on the outside of one of his heavy space gantlets. His mind was getting dimmer. Cold was biting home, savagely. Harwich wanted to see just how much longer he could keep going. It was eight hours now, since Bayley's ship had appeared. Slowly more time crept by. His boots trudged in the desert dust, mechanically. The hands of his watch moved on. One hour more. Another.

Why didn't he desert the dead weight of Paul Arnold? But you never deserted somebody who was like a kid brother, did you?

The patrol pilot's breath was coming fast and short, now. The last of his air was being used up. It was useless to try to replenish the oxygen flasks with hand power, even though he was suffocating.

Harwich tripped in the dust, and fell sprawling. Jupiter, shining down upon him, somehow looked like a fat face, tremendously bloated in size—the face of George Bayley. Harwich cursed, and tried to crawl toward the south.

Did he hear a sound through his oxygen helmet—a sound loud enough for the tenuous Ionian atmosphere to transmit? Or was it only the roaring of the unsteady

pulses in his ears? He tried to look ahead, but his vision was very dim, now, and the light of Jupiter and his moons was so confusing. The shadows of the rocks and the ruined buildings were so very black.

But suddenly Harwich squinted. Something *was* moving toward him, skimming low over the ground, but not touching it. Something that glinted wickedly, and showed long, shadowy arms. It was no hallucination. Evan Harwich was sure of that! Fear came out of that numb fog into which his brain was settling. It gave him a last, feeble spurt of strength. He knew that here he must be facing a tiny part of Io's colossal riddle.

He tried to crawl away from nameless danger, dragging Paul Arnold with him. He got behind a mass of million-year-old masonry, tufted with prickly plants.

But the thing that pursued him, easily overcame his weak, instinctive effort to find concealment. Cold metal claws closed on him. He felt himself lifted upward, into the night. His mind toppled away into black nothingness.

SOMEHOW, it wasn't the end of life. Harwich began to regain his senses, slowly. First he heard a distant, muffled clanging. For a long time before he paid any real attention to the fact, he was aware that strange warm rays were pouring down upon his body. They seemed to heal and soothe his aching muscles.

He opened his eyes at last. Startled, he sat up. Around him was the warm glitter of glass and metal. His space suit was gone. He was in a crystalline cage, filled with warm, humid air. Odd gadgets, like ray lamps used in therapy, were fitted to the ceiling. Strange, tropical vegetation grew in the cage, and water tinkled somewhere.

There was a kind of soothing quiet over the place, except for that distant clanging. There was a smoothness to everything; a mood of mechanical refinement and perfection. It was almost hypnotic, somehow. It dazed and quieted the senses.

Paul Arnold, clad in the slacks and shirt he'd worn under his space armor, was lying on the floor beside Harwich. He was still unconscious, but he was breathing evenly. His color was much better than before. The rays from the roof above were slowly healing his weakened body.

Evan Harwich shook the boy gently. "Wake up, Paul!" he urged. This must be it! The center of Power! The place we wanted to find! Some kind of machine bought us!"

Paul Arnold rubbed his eyes and sat up. Together, Harwich and the boy looked around through the crystal walls of the cage in which they were confined.

"There—there's the Tower!" young Arnold stammered at last, pointing.

It glittered in the faint morning sunshine. It was undoubtedly the same huge pinnacle that astronomers had photographed from the other moons of Jupiter. Only it was close, now, its details sharp and clear and real. Around its slender, tapered spire, thousands of feet aloft, the faintest of frosty aureoles clung; a ghostly light, like the sundogs of Earthly winter days.

"The Tower must be the source of the Ionian force envelope, Evan!" Paul Arnold offered after a moment. "That light up there at its top almost proves it."

Both men were talking vaguely, thinking vaguely, looking around vaguely. In part this must have been because of sheer wonder. Places like the Spacemen's Haven on Ganymede seemed as far away as a dream now.

An incomprehensible sense of depression was creeping over Evan Harwich, as he studied his surroundings further. There were many other cages in view, arranged in blocks, with paved alleyways between. Vegetation was thick in the evidently air-conditioned habitations. Little pools of water glistened in them daintily, strange paradox on dying Io.

And there were creatures, too. Scores of them in each cage. Strange, fragile, sluglike animals crept about aimlessly. They looked just faintly human, with their pinkish skins and manlike heads. But there was no slight shadow of intelligence in those great, sad, stupid eyes.

Harwich wasn't squeamish, but he looked at these futile animals with a certain pitying revulsion. "What kind of a nursery place have we got ourselves into, Paul?" he grumbled quizzically.

Arnold shrugged. "They're something like men, these things, aren't they?" he offered in puzzlement. "Maybe that's an-

other unknown quantity to figure out. But this place is plenty wonderful, though. Look!"

The youth was pointing upward. Against the cold Ionian sky a flattened object was circling at low altitude. A flying machine without wings, it seemed to be. From it dangled strange webby metal arms, as it moved in a circular path, above the surrounding desert hills. It seemed to keep watch over those thousands of crystal cages in the valley. It must be a guardian of some sort.

"I'm not at all sure I like it here," Harwich growled. "We were fixed up, revived, made new men again, so to speak; but still I don't like it here."

"Somehow I've got the same idea," Paul Arnold agreed with a quizzical smile.

A little clinking noise behind the two men made them turn about. After that, awe kept them spellbound. They didn't speak. What was there to say? They didn't try to retreat, either. What was the use? If what they saw was danger, they could do nothing to avert it. Hypnotized with wonder, they only stared, feeling as helpless as the larvae in an ant-hill, tended and cared for by the workers.

A SECTION of the cage-bottom had raised, like a trapdoor. A bulk was creeping through the opening. It was a machine, so marvelous, so refined in its functioning, that it seemed far more than alive. It was flat, like a small tractor; but there were no treads for it to move on. It seemed, rather, to glide on a cushioning, grayish mist. The thing purred softly, like a great cat, and tiny lights twinkled in crystalline parts of it—batteries to deliver fearful atomic or cosmic power, perhaps. The mechanism had many flexible tentacular arms of metal that glinted with a lavendar luster.

But even the substance of those arms, the metal itself, looked indefinite and eye-hurting at the edges, as though it was partly fourth-dimensional, or something.

Both men grasped the truth. Here was that million-year advancement of science that they'd talked about with such thrilled fascination, in the stuffy bar of the Spacemen's Haven, back in Ganymede City. But Ganymede City, with all its human crudeness and inefficiency, seemed like a lost, happy legend, now, to Arnold and Harwich. Far, far away, and dim. For here was dread wonder to eclipse it. Futurian fact! Physical principles of such a miraculous order that mankind had scarcely dreamed of their outer fringes yet, were functioning here.

The flat machine advanced. But it was only instinct working, when the two men crouched away from it a little. It was useless to fight; it was useless to run.

"Get away, you!" Paul Arnold grumbled dully to the mechanism. "Beat it! Scram."

And Harwich was reacting in a similar manner. "What the hell!" he stammered. "What are you trying to do with us."

It was almost funny—the ineffectual, confused protest of those two men. They were like children too lost in their new environment to know what was dangerous and what was not.

Misty, lavender tentacles reached out and grasped them carefully. They were lifted from the floor of the cage like babes. Once Harwich's great freckled arms tautened, as though he was going to battle the monstrous miracle that held him. But futility checked the urge. Where was there anything to win by struggling, now? And how could a mere man win anyway, against soft-moving mechanical power, that should belong to the far future? Oddly the tentacles were warm and tingling, not cold like you'd think metal should be.

And so Arnold and Harwich submitted to a paternal, mechanical dominance, regretfully, because there was nothing else to do. It hurt their sense of freedom, but where was there any alternative?

Still floating a little off the tile pavement of the cage, the machine carried the two men easily to the opening in the floor, and glided down into a crystal-roofed tunnel. There it began to accelerate swiftly, flying with bullet-like speed, a foot or so above the glass bottom of the passage.

The tunnel's roof was transparent as air. Through it, Harwich and Arnold could see that they were nearing the Tower rapidly. After only a moment of whizzing, breath-taking flight, they had arrived within that great, enigmatic edifice, for the passage entered its base.

There, in an eerie half-twilight, the flat

little machine released the two humans whom it had brought here, to the Tower.

Mute with an even greater wonder than before, Harwich and Arnold stared around them. The room was gigantic, soaring up in a huge, metal-ribbed dome. Scores of crystal-walled passages led into this colossal chamber of secrets. The whole immense Tower building was transparent, except that some darkening pigment had been added to the material that composed it, till it was like bluish glass. Through it the desolate surrounding hills of Io could be seen, and the cages, filled with those aimless, pathetic, sluglike creatures.

But the attention of the two men was drawn inevitably to the center of the room. Rearing up there, under the rotunda of the dome, was a massive, lavender-sheened pyramid. It gave a steady, throbbing sound, as of countless tiny wheels and shafts whirling inside it, working cams and rods, and who knew what else?

"Dammit!" Evan Harwich kept muttering under his breath in dim confusion. "Dammit."

He was used to machinery, yes. He was used to the roar of rockets, and to the delicate instruments used in space flight. But this was machinery of a far higher order. That busy, vibrating pyramid, squatting there like some huge idol, somehow seemed to possess a definite personality of its own!

Suddenly Paul Arnold clutched the patrol pilot's arm. "I wonder if I believe what I see!" he whispered tensely. "Look!"

Harwich's gaze followed the lines of the boy's pointing finger to something quite near—so near, and seemingly so insignificant in this vast, somber, throbbing interior, that he had not noticed before.

Just at the base of the pyramid there was an artistic little structure, consisting of four slender pillars and a roof. It looked like a small, ornamental kiosk or arbor, so artfully were the scientific details of it—the coils in its top, and the delicate filaments that pronged from them—concealed in the decorative metal scrollwork.

Within the pillared structure, somehow, there stood a man—an Earthman. His heavy body was clad now in a rocketeer's leather coverall. At his waist dangled a heat pistol, and on his fat face there was a strange, wild sort of smirk.

"Howdy, boys!" he greeted. "Yes, it's me—George Bayley, the guy who used to keep a print shop in Ganymede City! I've been here longer than you have, and I've been able to find out more. Pretty nice, huh? The people of Io had science perfected before they became extinct. Everything was done by machines, even investing. Not a bit of work to do any more. And if they wanted anything special, they just came into this little coop, here, and wished."

BAYLEY paused, still smirking. His loud voice had seemed distant in that great room, and vibrant with awe. Harwich and Arnold stared at him for a moment, neither knowing quite what to say, or what to believe.

And what was that which had just spilled from his lips, as though he had been a little afraid of the statement himself? About perfected science, and wishing?

"You're crazy!" Evan Harwich stormed fiercely. "You're a liar!"

But his furious tone was tremulous with doubt, even as he spoke. He knew at once that he'd just grabbed onto these words, and uttered them, maybe because, somehow, he hated Bayley, and wanted to contradict his seemingly impossible claims. But in this temple of un-Earthly marvels, one's whole standard of judgment was upset. Possible and impossible became meaningless terms here, at the foot of this great, whirring pyramid, which seemed a symbol of omnipotence.

"Crazy?" Bayely questioned. "No, Harwich, you can't say that, when you're all tangled up and fuddled yourself! What I said about wishing is true. Telepathic control of machines, it must be. This place is so damned wonderful that it would turn Aladdin of the Wonderful Lamp green with envy! And it would drive the Genie of the Lamp down into his shoes in shame!"

Harwich's doubts, if they had been doubts, and not just confusions, began to dim a trifle. After all, one of the big objectives of the science of Earthmen, was to make life easier; to transfer as much of the burden of work as possible to ma-

chines. Why couldn't the same objective have been conceived here on the Forbidden Moon? Not only conceived, but accomplished? Io was an old world; life had begun here sooner than on Earth, and science, too! So there had been more time for advancement.

"All right, Bayley," Harwich growled grudgingly. "Tell us what you've discovered."

"Yes, for Pete sake, tell us!" Paul Arnold joined in.

It was odd, the way they were asking the fat printer for information, now, when they should be hating him for the wrongs he had done them. But, perhaps, the human mind can hold only so much at one time. For the moment there was room only for dazed awe and questioning in their thoughts, and hatred was temporarily pushed into the background. The equal of Aladdin's miracles did not seem so far from possibility, here!

"Okay!" George Bayley rumbled. "Glad to spill the beans; what I know of them. I arrived here in my space ship about fourteen hours ago, when it was still dark. The Tower building here looked by far the most important, so I came straight to it. There were machines flying about, but they paid no attention to me at all, so I wasn't worried much about what they might do to me.

"Leaving my ship on the other side of the Tower, I got into this room through a tunnel. I was wearing a space armor, of course. I passed through a kind of airlock. This chamber was just like you see it now, except that lights were burning, because it was night."

"And then?" Paul Arnold questioned eagerly.

"Exploring, I climbed into this little metal coop, here at the foot of the pyramid," Bayley went on. "By then I was pretty flabbergasted with all I'd seen. I began to think I needed a drink of something strong. Yep, it must have been telepathy! Because presto—one of those flat flying machines with the tentacles, whizzed up to me from a tunnel exit. It was carrying a kind of crystal carafe.

"Boy, I didn't know what to think! I didn't know whether I ought to taste the stuff in that carafe, at first. But finally I did. It was damned good. Not alcoholic, but something a whole lot better."

Harwich and Arnold looked at each other, as Bayley paused, as if to get his breath. They looked up at the pyramid, throbbing above them, like some great, cryptic, servant personality. The feeling that Bayley was telling the truth, was growing on them.

"Naturally you tried other things, after the carafe was brought to you, Bayley," Paul Arnold prompted. "You wanted to see how much further this expression of desires by telepathy might be carried. You wanted to see how much more you could use the ancient Ionian science."

Bayley, still standing in that little metal-pillared structure, nodded slowly. "You catch on quick, Arnold," he said. "First I wished for gold, since it was the first thing I thought of. The sounds inside the pyramid changed a little, as though an order was going out somehow, maybe by radio. Five minutes later a whole bunch of those flying machines came into the Tower here, carrying bars of gold in their tentacles. There it is."

The printer was pointing toward a dully gleaming heap of yellow ingots near the farther wall of the chamber.

"But this, I soon found out, was just kid stuff!" Bayley continued. "I suppose if I'd thought of radium here in this wishing coop, I would have got a couple of tons of that, too! But I wished for a space ship—something special, beyond anything an Earthman ever saw before! Well, the pyramid buzzed a little longer and stranger this time, as though it was sort of thinking and planning, and as though the wheels inside it were maybe inventing, too. Then, somewhere far off, there was a lot of pounding for about an hour. I guess you know the answer, boys. There she is—the sweetest little super-futuristic space flier you ever saw!"

Harwich and Arnold stared at the torpedo-like ship that rested in a cradle-like support nearby. It was completely without rocket-tubes, or other visible means of propulsion. But its rakish lines and wicked lavender glitter made it look as though it might well reach the distant stars themselves.

EVAN HARWICH bit his lip tensely. Suddenly a thought struck him. "Did

you see any Ionians since you've been here, Bayley?" he asked. "Any living, intelligent beings who might question your right to be prowling around?"

Bayley laughed. "Not one!" he returned. "They're extinct, I'm sure of it! And that's lucky for me."

The patrol pilot was beginning to put the pieces of the Forbidden Moon's riddle together at last. And Paul Harwich must have been doing the same. The evidence, as far as it went, was clear.

Perfected science! The fat printer had told them that all you had to do was think your wishes in that queer little pillared structure. And the machines translated your wishes into fact. Unless Bayley had lied, and there was small reason to suppose that he had, the rest was maybe not so difficult to understand.

First, the great envelope of force around Io. That was to keep possibly dangerous intruders away, of course. Thus, the ancient Ionians had lived in carefree idleness and luxury, tended by their perfected machines. The thing in the pyramid must be the master servant mechanism, reachable in that pillared kiosk, by telepathy. It must be the coordinator, in contact with the other mechanisms by radio, or something. Adding and calculating machines, way back in the Twentieth Century, had thought and reasoned, after a fashion. More recently, on Earth, apparati of a similar nature had done far more, working out intricate mathematical problems, far more swiftly and accurately than any human being could.

And the apparatus within the pyramid must be much the same thing, but developed to the *n*th degree! A vast planning, calculating device that could reason and invent with a swiftness and perfection far beyond any living mind. But it was still just mechanical; a servant apparatus that thought by the turning of the wheels and the movement of levers inside it with no more consciousness than an adding machine of the Twentieth Century!

This was the way Harwich figured it all out. And he saw something else, too.

"Uh-uh, Bayley," he remarked suddenly. "Soon after that new space flier was brought here at your command, you decided that you were complete boss around here, didn't you? There were no ancient Ionians in your way. All you had to do was wish, inside that telepathy kiosk, and it was just like Aladdin wishing with his lamp, eh?"

For the first time, cold, comprehending anger had come into the patrol pilot's tone.

"Why sure—sure!" Bayley growled back at him. "And why not? Just about anything I can think of is possible! And, let me tell you something else, you poor dope! You and Arnold wouldn't be alive now, if I hadn't wished it! I thought you might have gotten through the Ionian force shield somehow, when the RQ257 cracked up. I thought you might be somewhere out there on the desert still living. So I just wished that the machines go and get you, and revive you if you needed it. I thought maybe it might be fun."

It was enough. Cold anger reborn in Evan Harwich's breast was suddenly rekindled into blazing fury by the memory of the RQ257, and a wire filed almost through in a Gyon condenser. Evan Harwich's muscles tightened. Wordlessly he was about to leap at George Bayley.

But a warm metal tentacle whipped suddenly about his waist. The flat mechanism that had brought him and Arnold to the Tower, had seized him. Again, he was helpless.

"You see?" Bayley drawled. "I really am boss, here, just as you said. I just wished that you be restrained, and you are! But I've been doing too much talking and explaining. How about a little showing for a change, huh?"

"Damn you, Bayley!" Harwich growled, but the fat printer ignored the curse.

He only grimaced crookedly. "Let's make a couple more wishes," he taunted. "A couple of really good ones! How about a whole fleet of space ships, for instance? The biggest, most powerful fleet in the solar system! All automatic craft, capable of flying and maneuvering unmanned! Then, let's see, the other wish? It's not so difficult either. Both you and Arnold are my deadly enemies, Harwich. I think it would be fun to make my enemies squirm a little. I'd like to see you crack up, Harwich! You've always been so tough! So how about some kind of a discomfort device? Something really special? In short, a torture instrument!

Come on, pretty machines! Do your stuff!"

Paul Arnold's face turned pale, but he bit his lip courageously. Evan Harwich studied the strange, wild light in the fat printer's squinted eyes, and waited for whatever would happen.

There was a crescendoing whir within that huge pyramidal coordinator. The man who had usurped the rule of the ancient Ionians over their mechanical servitors, had given his telepathic orders. Already there were signs of obedience. Thinking and planning was going on in that pyramid; thinking and planning more intricate than that of the greatest human wizard that had ever lived, more soulless and swift than that of an adding machine.

Presently, from far away, came a thin, shrill sound. Looking back through the darkened glass walls of the Tower room, Harwich and Arnold, both of them clutched, now, by the tentacles of the flat robot, saw a horde of black specks collecting against the sky in the pale sunlight outside. A flock of those flat, tentacled, flying things.

They seemed to emerge from an opening in the ground; from a vault where perhaps they'd been stored for ages. In a gigantic swarm they hovered over the glass cages and their pathetic animal inhabitants. Then, drifting like gulls away from this weird city of the Forbidden Moon, they moved off toward the surrounding hills.

There, like swarming bees, they settled in their tremendous numbers, on the open, arid valley. Flame tools in their tendrils were brought into play. Dust, reddened with heat, began to rise.

"They're leveling the ground!" Paul Arnold whispered hoarsely. "They must be preparing a shipyard!"

"Sure, kid," George Bayley laughed, trying to conceal the half-scared wonder in his own voice. "Maybe it'll take weeks for them to build the fleet I asked for! But they'll do it! You'll see, if I happen to let you live that long!"

THE unholy wizardry of the Forbidden Moon was proven beyond all doubt. And in this weird Tower room, air-conditioned against the cold thinness of the atmosphere beyond its wall, the pyramid still throbbed a shrill portent of more to come.

A second robot mechanism soared into the chamber from a tunnel mouth. It bore a curious tripod-like instrument. The flying automaton spiralled down like a bubble, and came to rest beside Harwich and the youth. Pinioned by the tendrils of the other automaton, they were helpless to do anything but watch and submit. They were pushed flat on their backs, and held firmly. The tripod instrument was set up between them.

"The discomfort device, this must be!" Bayley gloated, shifting his weight from one foot to the other. "In just a few seconds there's going to be some fun, I'll bet! Now, Harwich and Arnold, I'm wishing you bad luck. Just a little foretaste of what I might wish later! Okay, pretty machines! Give my beloved enemies the works, just for a second."

Two rods of metal, projecting down from the tripod, were set in position by one of the automatons. One rod touched Harwich's skull, the other Paul Arnold's. A switch was moved.

There was no sound; but all of the patrol pilot's body seemed suddenly and maddeningly afire. To the very center of his mind, agony stabbed, viciously. No searing pain of any injury he had ever received, could have equaled this. He writhed, longing to scream his lungs out, as that moment of sheer hell seemed to last an age.

"God!" Paul gasped when it was over.

Both men were sweating and limp, and yet no visible harm had been done to their bodies. Artificial sensation, the torture must have been. Nerve impulses transmitted directly to the brain. A devilish, perverted achievement of superscience! Such agony might conceivably go on, in Satanic refinement, for months, without bringing death.

"You see, boys, I'm boss here as long as I stay in this little telepathy coop, where the old Ionians used to give their orders!" George Bayley hissed triumphantly. "All the wonders of the Forbidden Moon are mine to use, just as I see fit! There were just a bunch of machines here, waiting for somebody to control them. A pistol doesn't ask who pulls its trigger! And I got here first!"

"I was afraid of something like this when we were still on Ganymede, before any of us knew," Paul Arnold muttered raggedly.

And Evan Harwich understood very well what the youth meant. George Bayley was feeling that touch of power here. A sense of omnipotence was flattering his shallow ego, raising him in his own estimation to the level of some ruthless god. He, who had been a petty business man, a printer, a repairer of instruments, a loan shark! Just a crumby, fat little human being, ridiculous, small and conceited. Pathetic, too, stubborn, and lacking in judgment. There were many like him on Earth, and among the scattered spheres of Earth's interplanetary empire.

Maybe, after all, the wisdom of the Forbidden Moon was too big for the human race. Maybe they would have to grow themselves first, advance in evolution, before they would know how to handle and how to win real benefits from such wisdom.

"All right, Nero," Harwich growled contemptuously to Bayley. "I'll grant that you're in the driver's seat, ready to stop nowhere. Building a space fleet and all. But where is Clara Arnold?"

The patrol pilot asked the question with fear and doubt in his heart.

"Clara Arnold?" said Bayley almost casually. "Too damned clever for a girl! Said she thought I might have had something to do with the crackup of the RQ257. Said she was worried about Paul and you, too, Harwich, being maybe stranded still alive here on Io. But she said that she'd finally decided my promises weren't good for anything, anyway. That I'd have to rescue you two men first before she'd believe in me. Until then, our engagement was off."

Harwich felt a brief wave of elation, as he heard these words. Clara had seemed so quiet and timid; but she'd evidently proved herself plenty courageous and plenty smart.

"But where is she?" Harwich growled angrily. "Now, I mean!"

"Don't get excited," Bayley sneered. "She came to the Forbidden Moon with me, hoping to see you and the kid again. I left her locked in my rocket. But she can't mean much to me any more now! Not when they begin to hear about me all over the solar system! Just a passing fancy! I suppose I might just as well have the machines bring her here now, to see just how completely helpless you two dopes are!"

HARWICH and Paul Arnold were still pinioned to the floor by the automatons; but in the patrol pilot's slitted eyes glowed the subdued light of murder, futilely smoldering. The fat printer was absolutely master now of Clara, the boy, and himself. In his stupid, cruel, shallow vanity, cosmic power the deeper secrets of which he could never have understood, had driven Bayley to madness; to megalomania. That clanging and that red glow from near the distant hills showed the extent of his ambitions beyond question. The slave machines were not building that colossal fleet of space warships for nothing! Armed with weapons beyond human knowledge, such a fleet would sweep in aggressive fury to even the remotest world within the field of the sun's gravity!

But Harwich's feelings changed briefly to relief, when Clara Arnold was brought into the Tower room by another of those metal slaves. The automaton removed from her a flexible, transparent covering, of evidently airtight material, a protection against the rarity of the Ionian atmosphere, probably, for in being taken from the airlock of Bayley's rocket to the air-conditioned Tower here, she would otherwise have been exposed to suffocation.

The machine set the girl down gently. She looked scared, her blonde hair was awry, as though, maybe, she'd struggled with the robot; but otherwise she was still all right.

She looked about in wondering terror; for what she saw was still a complete mystery to her, just as it had been to her brother and Evan Harwich a little while ago. No one had told her anything yet.

"Paul—Evan!" she stammered. "What is all this here? This pyramid, and Bayley? What's happened? Tell me, somebody!"

"Take it easy, Clara," Harwich responded, trying to sound reassuring. "Everything will be all right!" he ended

a little unconvincingly, trying to shield the girl from grim truth.

"Everything's all right already, Clara," Bayley assured her mockingly. "I've got these two men of yours just where they can do the least harm! How would you like to see 'em squirm a little? I've got a special device for that purpose, something very refined and painful! And I've got just about everything else! In a month's time I could give you the planet Earth, to wear in a ring around your finger, if I happened to want to."

"What's he talking about, Evan?" the girl pleaded again, the shadow of fear in her face deepening. "It sounds sort of awful! Please tell me. Why are those flat monsters holding you and Paul to the floor?"

"I told you to take it easy, Clara," Harwich returned with a trace of sternness. "This maniac, Bayley, has got the upper hand now, but I said everything would be all right, didn't I?"

The patrol pilot was trying again to reassure the girl, with a show of truculent bravado this time. He hoped that truculence would make his words sound true, as though he had a trump card up his sleeve, or something.

"All right in the end, Harwich?" the fat printer chuckled wickedly. "Well, the end's pretty close. In another minute you'll be too tortured to do anything but scream. Right now I'm thinking and wishing. Look, the automatons are getting that agony tripod ready again!"

It was true. Metal tentacles were whipping about, adjusting the torture rods to touch Harwich's and Paul Arnold's skulls again.

Everything will be all right! That statement was a mocking memory to the patrol pilot now. An empty, rash challenge to the man whose petty ego yearned to control even the solar system.

Harwich had never felt so completely helpless in his life before, not even when he had been suffocating out there on the deserts of the Forbidden Moon. If he could only somehow knock Bayley out of that little, pillared structure that served as a receiver for telepathic orders to the machines; if only he could replace him there for a second, then everything might be very, very different! But Harwich was held helpless to the pavement of the tower room. His massive muscles were useless against machine might!

Direct argument—an attempt to make Bayley see the narrowness and lack of originality in his colossal ambitions—he knew was equally futile. Bayley was stubborn and shallow and greedy. Besides, he would never admit that he was wrong, even if he felt the truth of it!

So Harwich felt utterly checkmated on every side. The clanging out there, the building of the space fleet, mocked him. The rustle of wheels in that huge pyramid coordinator mocked him. All the Aladdin-like miracles of the Forbidden Moon mocked him, pointing out his impotence to do anything, now.

He even wondered savagely why that great coordinator mechanism, with all its terrific powers, didn't revolt against the dominance of the puny human being that mastered it. But, of course, it would have no desire to revolt. It had no desires of any kind, no capacity for happiness or misery, no consciousness even. It was no more alive, no more sentient, than an adding machine. Only infinitely more complex. It invented things and it directed lesser mechanisms only by the rolling of the wheels and the surge of energy inside it. And it responded to telepathic control of whomever was there to give it, just as a space ship might respond to whomever was at its throttle.

Still, there had to be some way out of this mess! Harwich knew it wasn't just Clara and Paul and himself that were in danger. It was everything he knew and respected. Freedom. Liberty. Unless he and his companions were able to do something, a Dark Age would come, surely. An age of machines, ruled by a madman.

The rod of the torture instrument was touching his skull. In just another moment the agony would begin. But what was Paul Arnold muttering beside him?

"Evan, those animals in the cages! We thought they looked like men didn't we? Here's something else: Maybe they are men, in a way! Men who went backward in evolution; lost their intelligence."

NO one but Harwich could have heard the boy, for he spoke in a very low

tone. But at once the patrol pilot understood; grasped a part of the Ionian riddle that he had missed before. Machines. No thinking or work to do. Indolence. And then?

At once Harwich saw a way, a slim possibility to avert cosmic catastrophe. He couldn't appeal to Bayley's reason, but maybe he could appeal to his fears. He had to try it, anyway.

Suddenly the patrol pilot's lips curled in derision and contempt. "Bayley," he said, "you're an utter damned fool! You think you'll extend your power all over the solar system. Well, maybe you will do that; but in the end you'll be destroyed! You give the orders—sure! But do you understand the thing in that pyramid? It was made to serve, as all machines are. The ancient Ionians had it pretty nice for themselves, yes. But did you ever wonder what happened to them? *Where are they now? Do you know, Bayley?"*

Harwich's final question was a dry whisper, like the voice of some ghost of ages past.

"Where are those ancient Ionians now, Bayley?" he repeated.

No man could have escaped awe there in that tremendous Tower room, where all the mysteries of the eons seemed to be congregated, many of them hidden and unknown and perhaps dangerous. George Bayley's eyes were suddenly very big. Quite evidently there were many things that he had not thought about. His gaze lingered momentarily on the great throbbing pyramid, inscrutable there in this huge dusky chamber.

"Stop trying to bluff me, you crazy idiot!" the fat printer stormed at last. "The Ionians are extinct, of course!"

Harwich managed to grin wolfishly. "If you believe that, Bayley, do you want to follow them into extinction?" he questioned. "Yes, they mastered science. They conquered even the problem of the thinning atmosphere and the loss of moisture and heat on their dying world. But after they turned their science over to the machines, something happened to them. Their numbers began to grow less, yes. They lost control of their empire, which must have included all the moons of —Jupiter. But they didn't completely die out, Bayley! Something happened to those Ionians that was far worse! Do you know what it was, Bayley? Do you want the same thing to happen to you?"

"I don't know what you're talking about!" the printer stammered furiously, fear of the unknown spreading over his plump face.

"No, those ancient people of the Forbidden Moon didn't become completely extinct," Harwich continued. "I believe you can see quite a few of them from the Tower room here. The walls are semi-transparent, and those cages outside aren't far away. They're full of Ionians. Slug-like, brainless monstrosities without even intelligence enough or will enough to wish any more!"

Harwich paused to let the facts sink into George Bayley's mind.

"That's them!" the patrol pilot continued. "It's an old theory that any race has to keep struggling, thinking, working; otherwise it goes backwards. By using their brains and muscles, Earthmen developed from apish ancestors, you know. But here the Ionians had everything done for them. So evolution was reversed. They lost their intelligence. And now, what are they? Stupid beasts, tended by machines that follow the original orders of long ago to take care of them. Worse than animals in a zoo."

Bayley's eyes were fairly popping, as he stared through the semi-transparent walls of the Tower room. Doubtless he could see those creatures in their air-conditioned habitations. Just helpless, squirming, incubator freaks!

"I wondered what they were—why they were here," Bayley stammered.

Harwich almost believed at first that he had won a point with the obese loan shark —scared him out of most of his wild ambitions. But then, gradually, he saw Bayley's expression grow a trifle less tense. It was just as Harwich had feared. The printer was beginning to realize that it must have taken countless generations to degenerate to their present sorry state. The same condition could not affect him personally. When Bayley saw this truth, he would be the same megalomaniac as before.

There was only that one slim chance left for Harwich. Bayley's attention was strongly diverted now. But in a few sec-

onds more, he would be himself again.

Was the grip of the metal tentacles that held Harwich a little looser than before. now, because Bayley, the master of machines, had his mind so intensely on other things, and away from the thought of giving telepathic commands?

In a sudden, savage lunge, Harwich jerked free from the automaton that held him to the floor. His clothing was torn and his flesh scraped, but what did this matter? Everything depended on instant action. The patrol pilot leaped past Paul Arnold, and his sister, Clara, who had only watched and listened while he had talked with such grim truth to Bayley.

ALREADY the flat, glittering robot was after Harwich, but he continued his surprise rush toward the roofed, pillared kiosk that was the receiver for telepathic orders.

His attack ended in a flying tackle. Bayley was drawing his heat pistol, but before he could fire it, Harwich's weight struck him. There, together, in the kiosk, they wrestled and fought. At last there was a chance for the patrol pilot to bring his massive muscles into play. He swung his heavy fists, and all the fury of weeks of hardship and misfortune were back of his blows. Bayley tottered away from under the kiosk, and for a second Harwich stood there free.

He was in the position of control at last; but Bayley had his pistol out and aimed, now. Clara was screaming as the fat man pressed the trigger.

It was too late for Harwich to marshal his thoughts properly. He was only able to will that the automaton behind him should cease attacking him. He could not call to his aid any of the great science of Io, in time.

With the speed of light, a slender pencil of intense heat waves from Bayley's pistol, struck his side and burned straight through his body. No bullet could have drilled a neater hole. Harwich's legs collapsed under him, and he lay writhing there within the kiosk.

A split second later the heat pistol in Bayley's hand spat again. Turning weakly, Harwich saw Clara crumple and go down. In another instant, Paul became the third victim.

"You're done, Harwich!" the fat printer was yelling triumphantly. "You're finished, all of you!"

But by now the patrol man's seething flood of hate had registered. He was within the telepathy kiosk; and if he had ever willed instant destruction for anyone, he willed it now, for Bayley. Under other circumstances he might not have felt so vengeful, but his ebbing pulses blazed with fury.

There was a click within that vast, slumberous pyramid, that loomed like a grim god in this shadowy place of enigmas. The automaton that had recently held Harwich captive, seemed to move like a maddened animal, created out of pure lightning. Its tentacles whipped around Bayley long before he could fire again. Harder than steel cable, the tendrils tightened, like the coils of a python.

There was a choked cry of terror and anguish, and then a sickening, crunching, squashing sound, as flesh and bone and blood oozed between those constricting metal loops.

It was almost the last thing that Evan Harwich saw. He was mortally wounded, a slender hole bored through his side.

Harwich's last delirium was a dream. A silly dream, maybe. Clara and he together. A little house. Fancifully he pictured its details. Maybe a mining concession somewhere here among the moons of Jupiter, too. An orderly life. Not all this hectic battling with unknown dangers any more. He was a little tired of adventure, a little tired of being space patrol pilot, too. He could resign.

Somewhere, Evan Harwich's fanciful thinking came to an end.

HE awoke suddenly. Paul Arnold was shaking him.

"On your feet, you big lug!" the boy was yelling happily. "There's not a thing wrong with you, now! Clara and I have been awake for half an hour."

Harwich staggered erect, grumbling confusedly, his stiff, black hair awry. He'd been lying on a divan. The room around him was almost familiarly furnished, except for slightly fantastic details of decoration. The windows were wide, and beyond them there was a sort of yard, with freshly planted trees. Over the whole

set-up there was a fine crystal airdrome.

"What the heck! Where in the name of sense are we?" Harwich burst out in startled pleasure.

He looked first at Paul Arnold, and then at Clara, whose amber eyes were twinkling with secretive mischief. It was as though the two had some sort of joke up their sleeves.

Harwich glanced again out of the window. Beyond the airdome, glinting and new, was what looked like improved mining equipment. Cropping out of the ground was the grayish, shiny stuff of a rich ore lode. And there was a space ship, too; bright and slender and strange, but it looked plenty serviceable!

"Where are we, anyway?" Harwich demanded again, still completely in the dark. "Does either of you two know?"

"Still on Io, evidently!" Paul Arnold breezed with a taunting grin. "Same kind of hills and general character of country! When Bayley shot me, I passed out. I didn't know anything more until I woke up here a little while ago!"

"But this layout, Paul!" Harwich growled. "This house and this mining stuff! How come? You've got some kind of an answer in mind, I'm sure, by the way you look! I give up. Spill the gag!"

"Okay, Evan," said the boy. "I really do think I've got that part figured out! After Bayley shot you with the heat-pistol, you were lying in that telepathy kiosk in the Tower room. Consciously or unconsciously, you must have done some wishing there, before your brain blacked out."

Harwich gasped. So that was it! He'd wanted to be alive, though he had been mortally wounded. And so he was! His shirt was open. There was a neat round scar on his chest, left by the heat-ray burn, and evidence of careful supersurgery! The automatons of the Forbidden Moon had saved his life. Probably Clara's and Paul's lives, too. All while they were unconscious! The house, the garden, the mine!"

"Our miracle hunt on the Forbidden Moon hasn't turned out so badly," Paul Arnold remarked. "But so far it's been a lot different from what Dad or you or I could have anticipated. This place looks like a nice family setup, Evan. Did your wish include anybody besides yourself?"

Harwich flushed, and looked sheepish. Clara, there, was definitely blushing, but she was smiling, too.

The ex patrol pilot managed a nervous grin. "I guess you got me there, Paul," he said. "Now, if it's all right with you, Clara, I don't know whether I have to say it or not, since it's a dead giveaway. But will you marry me?"

He got it out, feeling that it had been an awful job. But Clara smiled happily.

"Try and stop me, Evan," she laughed. "There has to be someone around to keep you from getting conceited. Just because you won out for us here on Io, doesn't mean that you won't need bossing yourself, once in a while!"

Paul Arnold winked, and left discreetly for other parts of the house.

Arm in arm Clara and Evan looked through a window that faced west. Something was flying there, high up in the sky. It glinted in the late afternoon sunlight. A lonely speck against the cold firmament, it seemed to hurry, bent on a last mission.

A few minutes later, from the east, there came a terrific concussion. The whole dark purple sky, above those sullen hills, was illuminated with a bluish-white glare for a second. Flying fragments soared far into space.

Clara clung tightly to Evan. "What was that?" she questioned fearfully.

Harwich grinned, but still there was a haunting shadow of sadness in his face. "I'm sure I know," he said. "That was the end of the science of the Forbidden Moon. The end of the force shield, apparatus, the end of those poor Ionians, and the end of the pyramid! The end of the whole thing. Suicide, you might call it. You see, back there in the telepathy kiosk, I wished that too, and the machines were made only to obey. I hope that when Earthmen, in the future, learn as much science as existed here on Io, they'll know how to use it, too. We're much too young a race yet, I guess."

Clara Arnold's awe softened after a moment. "Come on, Evan," she said. "Let's forget all about that for now. I want to show you the kitchen, here. It's ducky! . . ."

The Ballad of Blaster Bill

By Nelson S. Bond

When you're hurtling 'round the Sun
On the perihelion run
Through the asteroids from Jupiter to Mars,
You may chance to see a light
In the everlasting night,
An unwinking beacon, sister to the stars.

Then each member of the crew
From the lowest wiper to
The Skipper on the bridge, a moment will
Drop all work and gravely, mute,
Raise his arm in full salute
To the final resting place of Blaster Bill.

Afterward, if you are not
Just a nosey *rankey-pot,**
And the thing that ticks within you isn't stone,
You may learn from spacemens' lips
Tales of ancient days and ships,
And why Bill the Blaster lies there all alone.
(**rankey-pot*—Earthlubber; from the Venusian "*renqui-pth*")

II

Surly Jonathan McNeer
Was the Master Engineer
On the wallowing old freighter, *Dotty Sue.*
He was gruff, uncouth, unclean,
And his language was obscene,
But a better grease-pot never sheared the blue.

He had nerves of tempered steel,
And without a squawk or squeal
He would plot a course to Hades for a thrill;
But his temper was like fire
And the man who drew his ire,
Who tried his patience most, was—Blaster Bill.

Bill the Blaster was a lazy,
Good-for-nothing (some said crazy),
Guy who didn't have a gray cell in his head.
He had muscle in his shoulders,
And his forearms were like boulders,
But his cranium and can were filled with lead.

Without ever even trying
He could make McNeer start crying
Down the wrath of Baal upon his hapless dome.
He and awkwardness were cousins,
He broke things by scores and dozens
Just one look at him and tubes sang, "Ohm, sweet Ohm!"

On the *Dotty Sue,* his duty
Was to keep all tutti-frutti
The rocket-blasts, the motors and the rest
Of the intricate equipment
Which insures a speedy shipment
To the planets that are buttons on Sol's vest.

But McNeer's deserved objection
Was—Bill practiced vivisection
Every time he placed his thumbs (which numbered five)
On a section of machinery.
"He'd be better in a beanery!"
Was McNeer's complaint. "I'll skin the guy alive!"

"Now, there, Jonathan!" the Skipper
Used to say, "Don't be a yipper.
I'm sure Bill does the best he can." But grief
Etched gray, fretful lines and horrid
On McNeer's space-weathered forehead.
"The best is none to good!" complained the Chief.

III

Two months out of Io City
Everything was running pretty,
The asteroids were thirty hours away,
When McNeer, to whom perfection
Was a sort of predilection,
Said, "Bill, we'll take the hypos down today."

Well, the hypatomic motors
Are the energy-plus rotors
That control a spaceship's motion in the void.
When the ship is once free-wheeling
'Neath the vast celestial ceiling,
Then's the time to clean the grit with which they're cloyed.

So Bill said, "Yup. Okey-dokey!"
And with movements slow and pokey
Dismounted Number one and got to work.
"Do a perfect job, you *globaar!**
Or I'll crown you with a crow-bar!"
Warned McNeer—and then he vanished with a smirk.
(**globaar*—shiftless person; Ionian term of reproach)

It was some two hours later
As, upon his "sweet pertater"
The Chief Engineer was tootling *Venus Nell,*
That the Second Mate, half witless,
Out of breath and frightened spitless,
Burst in crying, "Chief, we're on our way to hell!"

"What, already?" drawled McNeer
But the mate, pale green with fear,
Bawled, "Go get the hypos working, without fail!
And go do it on the double,
'Cause we're in a peck of trouble!
A rogue asteroid is riding on our tail!"

IV

Now, in case you don't remember,
A "rogue asteroid's" a member
Of the minor planet group that's slipped its cogs.
Wrenched by gravitational forces,
It careens about its courses
In an orbit not computable by logs.

Tons on tons of granite, metaled,
By the tug of Jove unsettled,
Weaving in, about, below its normal belt;
Is it any wonder why a
Spaceman fears this mad pariah?
Dreads the moment when its power may be felt?

With a single, sharp, explosive
Word that acted as corrosive
On the mate's embarrassed eardrums, raced McNeer
To the engine-room where, peaceful,
Happy, busy, very grease-full,
Labored Blaster Bill, with grins from ear to ear.

"Bill!" McNeer cried, voice all blurry,
"Get that hypo in a hurry—"
Then his order strangled as he stared, aghast.
"What is this?" he faltered weakly.
"What is this?" And Bill, quite meekly,
Said, "I thought I'd melt it down for a recast!"

His imagination racing
The Chief gazed upon the casing
Of the hypatomic motor Number Three,
Now a pool of molten metal
Bubbling gently in a kettle.
"Goddlemighty!" yelled McNeer. "This thing can't be!

Bill asked, "Why the mad commotion?"
Then they glimpsed a sudden motion
And the Skipper's face was in the televise.
"Got the motors fixed, McNeer?"
And the Chief said, low and clear,
"No. Does someone know a prayer amongst you guys?"

"Why?" the Skipper roared, distrait;
The Chief let him have it straight.
"The hypatomic's melted into wax!
But before that rogue gets near,
I've a twelve pound hammer here
To warp across my blaster's parallax!"

"Wait!" the Captain cried, "Not yet!
We must cover every bet.
I'm commander of this freighter while she rolls.
We must somehow make a turn,
Shake that damn rogue off our stern.
Suppose you try the manual controls?"

McNeer sadly shook his head
As he saw the rusty red
Of the long neglected manuals, but yelled,
"Hop to it, Bill, you dope!
It's our last and only hope—"
And then he stopped and gulped, "Well, I'll be helled!"

With his back arched neck to heel,
Bill was straining at the wheel;
The year-old rust was breaking off in flakes.
McNeer's eyes lit with joy,
He shouted, "Bill, my boy!
"She's yielding! See, there, lad? She gives! She shakes!"

And true enough, the screw
Of the gallant *Dotty Sue*
Was turning 'neath the blaster's mighty brawn.
The C. E.'s voice was thunder,
"We're getting out from under!
Just hold 'er, Bill; the danger will be gone!"

A moment, still as death,
While Bill the Blaster's breath
Rasped through the rocking room in tortured sobs,
Then from the bridge rang out
The Skipper's warning shout,
"Too late! Abandon ship, Chief! Don your lobs!"

McNeer said, "Too bad, Bill,
Just hold 'er there until
I get the lobs, and then we'll pull our freight."
With firm, untrembling hands
He took down from their stands
Two spacesuits, worn and old and out of date.

But Bill the Blaster stood
As motionless as wood;
His arms like knotted oak in cords of strain.
He slowly shook his head
And to the Chief he said,
"If all break ship, we'll not see Earth again."

"I know—" began McNeer,
But Bill roared out, "Stand clear!"
His arms upon the wheel were like a vise.
"Break ship and wait outside.
I'll make this baby ride!
I'll hold 'er till the devil skates on ice!"

Then in the visiplate
Appeared the Second Mate,
"All out below? Did you break ship, McNeer?"
McNeer said, "Right away!
Come on, Bill, don't delay!"
But Bill the Blaster panted, "Chief, stand clear!"

"You fool, you're courting death!"
Bill answered, "Save your breath,"
And grinned, "You'll need that oxygen outside!"
And stood like frozen steel
Beside that bucking wheel,
McNeer, reluctant, hovered at his side. . . .

Till Bill cried, "You damn fool!"
And grabbed a handy tool
And slashed it 'cross his headpiece like a mace.
There came a crashing roar,
McNeer knew nothing more
Until he woke to find himself in space.

V

About him, staff and crew
Of the ill-starred *Dotty Sue*
Were huddled, bitter, grim, but unafraid.
A quarter mile away
The last scene of the fray
Tween Man and Asteroid was being played.

Her stern jets flaming white
Against the endless night
The bobbing ship was fighting, bolt and nail,
To curve from underneath
Those looming tons of death
That poised above her like a cosmic flail.

McNeer cried, "No, Bill! No!"
And then his audio
Clacked with the Skipper's thin, metallio voice,
"There's nothing we can do
But hope he pulls her through.
He made his choice, McNeer; a hero's choice."

As they watched tensely, all,
The spaceship seemed to crawl
An inch, a foot, a yard, another yard . . .
Meanwhile, the massive rock
Raced blindly toward the shock
With vast, colossal, cosmic disregard.

And nearer yet they drew,
To their strange *rendezvous*
In space; Fate's balance hovered fine and thin.
And then, "The Lord be praised!"
The crew a paean raised;
McNeer's white lips cracked in a nerveless grin.

Imponderable mass
And spaceship seemed to pass
Each other with a hair 'twixt hull and face;
But then, as every voice
Roused in a loud rejoice,
A single boulder slashed through empty space—

The spaceship buckled, bent;
A gaping, white-fanged rent
Split stern plates, and McNeer's voice cracked with fear.
"Board ship, all hands!" he cried!
"Bill's dying there inside!"
The wan sun watched the killer disappear.

McNeer was first to kneel
Beside the shattered wheel
And Bill's pale, silent figure; gray with grief
He cried, "He's breathing yet!
Here, Skipper! Help me get—"
But Bill said, "No—don't try to lift me, Chief."

"I look all right on top
But . . . better get . . . a mop . . .
My underneath part's not so good. . . ." A chill
Ran through his broken frame,
But, to the last ditch game,
"I held 'er to 'er course—" said Blaster Bill.

VI

So—hurtling 'round the Sun
On the perihelion run
Through the asteroids from Jupiter to Mars,
You may chance to see a light
In the everlasting night,
An unwinking beacon, sister to the stars.

And then, if you are not
A lousy *rankey-pot*,
With the instincts of the back end of a horse,
You'll stand a moment, mute,
Arm raised in full salute
To Blaster Bill—who held 'er to 'er course.

DON LYNCH

The Dragon-Queen of Jupiter

By LEIGH BRACKETT

More feared than the deadly green snakes, the hideous red beetles of that outpost of Earth Empire, was the winged dragon-queen of Jupiter and her white Legions of Doom.

TEX stirred uneasily where he lay on the parapet, staring into the heavy, Jupiterian fog. The greasy moisture ran down the fort wall, lay rank on his lips. With a sigh for the hot, dry air of Texas, and a curse for the adventure-thirst that made him leave it, he shifted his short, steel-hard body and wrinkled his sandy-red

brows in the never-ending effort to see.

A stifled cough turned his head. He whispered, "Hi, Breska."

The Martian grinned and lay down beside him. His skin was wind-burned like Tex's, his black eyes nested in wrinkles caused by squinting against sun and blowing dust.

For a second they were silent, feeling the desert like a bond between them. Then Breska, mastering his cough, grunted:

"They're an hour late now. What's the matter with 'em?"

Tex was worried, too. The regular dawn attack of the swamp-dwellers was long overdue.

"Reckon they're thinking up some new tricks," he said. "I sure wish our relief would get here. I could use a vacation."

Breska's teeth showed a cynical flash of white.

"If they don't come soon, it won't matter. At that, starving is pleasanter than beetle-bombs, or green snakes. Hey, Tex. Here comes the Skipper."

Captain John Smith—Smith was a common name in the Volunteer Legion—crawled along the catwalk. There were new lines of strain on the officer's gaunt face, and Tex's uneasiness grew.

He knew that supplies were running low. Repairs were urgently needed. Wasn't the relief goin' to come at all?

But Captain Smith's pleasant English voice was as calm as though he were discussing cricket-scores in a comfortable London club.

"Any sign of the beggars, Tex?"

"No, sir. But I got a feeling. . . ."

"H'm. Yes. We all have. Well, keep a sharp. . . ."

A scream cut him short. It came from below in the square compound. Tex shivered, craning down through the rusty netting covering the well.

He'd heard screams like that before.

A man ran across the greasy stones, tearing at something on his wrist. Other men ran to help him, the ragged remnant of the force that had marched into new Fort Washington three months before, the first garrison.

The tiny green snake on the man's wrist grew incredibly. By the time the first men reached it, it had whipped a coil around its victim's neck. Faster than the eye could follow, it shifted its fangs from wrist to throat.

The man seemed suddenly to go mad. He drew his knife and slashed at his comrades, screaming, keeping them at bay.

Then, abruptly, he collapsed. The green snake, now nearly ten feet long, whipped free and darted toward a drainage tunnel. Shouting men surrounded it, drawing rapid-fire pistols, but Captain Smith called out:

"Don't waste your ammunition, men!"

Startled faces looked up. And in that second of respite, the snake coiled and butted its flat-nosed head against the grating.

In a shower of rust-flakes it fell outward, and the snake was gone like a streak of green fire.

Tex heard Breska cursing in a low undertone. A sudden silence had fallen on the compound. Men fingered the broken grating, white-faced as they realized what it meant. There would be no metal for repairs until the relief column came.

It was hard enough to bring bare necessities over the wild terrain. And air travel was impracticable due to the miles-thick clouds and magnetic vagaries. There would be no metal, no ammunition.

Tex swore. "Reckon I'll never get used to those varmints, Captain. The rattlers back home was just kid's toys."

"Simple enough, really." Captain Smith spoke absently, his gray eyes following the sag of the rusty netting below.

"The green snakes, like the planarians, decrease evenly in size with starvation. They also have a vastly accelerated metabolism. When they get food, which happens to be blood, they simply shoot out to their normal size. An injected venom causes their victims to fight off help until the snake has fed."

Breska snarled. "Cute trick the swamp men thought up, starving those things and then slipping them in on us through the drain pipes. They're so tiny you miss one, every once in a while."

"And then you get that." Tex nodded toward the corpse. "I wonder who the war-chief is. I'd sure like to get a look at him."

"Yes," said Captain Smith. "So would I."

He turned to go, crawling below the

parapet. You never knew what might come out of the fog at you, if you showed a target. The body was carried out to the incinerator as there was no ceremony about burials in this heat. A blob of white caught Tex's eye as a face strained upward, watching the officer through the rusty netting.

Tex grunted. "There's your countryman, Breska. I'd say he isn't so sold on the idea of making Venus safe for colonists."

"Oh, lay off him, Tex." Breska was strangled briefly by a fit of coughing. "He's just a kid, he's homesick, and he's got the wheezes, like me. This lowland air isn't good for us. But just wait till we knock sense into these white devils and settle the high plateaus."

If he finished, Tex didn't hear him. The red-haired Westerner was staring stiffly upward, clawing for his gun.

HE hadn't heard or seen a thing. And now the fog was full of thundering wings and shrill screams of triumph. Below the walls, where the ground-mist hung in stagnant whorls, a host of half-seen bodies crowded out of the wilderness into which no civilized man had ever gone.

The rapid-fire pistol bucked and snarled in Tex's hand. Captain Smith, lying on his belly, called orders in his crisp, unhurried voice. C Battery on the northeast corner cut in with a chattering roar, spraying explosive bullets upward, followed by the other three whose duty it was to keep the air clear.

Tex's heart thumped. Powder-smoke bit his nostrils. Breska began to whistle through his teeth, a song that Tex had taught him, called, "The Lone Prairee."

The ground-strafing crews got their guns unlimbered, and mud began to splash up from below. But it wasn't enough. The gun emplacements were only half manned, the remainder of the depopulated garrison having been off-duty down in the compound.

The Jupiterians were swarming up the incline on which the fort stood, attacking from the front and fanning out along the sides when they reached firm ground. The morasses to the east and west were absolutely impassable even to the swamp-men, which was what made Fort Washington a strategic and envied stronghold.

Tex watched the attackers with mingled admiration and hatred. They had guts; the kind the Red Indians must have had, back in the old days in America. They had cruelty, too, and a fiendish genius for thinking up tricks.

If the relief column didn't come soon, there might be one trick too many, and the way would be left open for a breakthrough. The thin, hard-held line of frontier posts could be flanked, cut off, and annihilated.

Tex shuddered to think what that would mean for the colonists, already coming hopefully into the fertile plateaus.

A sluggish breeze rolled the mist south into the swamps, and Tex got his first clear look at the enemy. His heart jolted sharply.

This was no mere raid. This was an attack.

Hordes of tall warriors swarmed toward the walls, pale-skinned giants from the Sunless Land with snow-white hair coiled in warclubs at the base of the skull. They wore girdles of reptile skin, and carried bags slung over their brawny shoulders. In their hands they carried clubs and crude bows.

Beside them, roaring and hissing, came their war-dogs; semi-erect reptiles with prehensile paws, their powerful tails armed with artificial spikes of bone.

Scaling ladders banged against the walls. Men and beasts began to climb, covered by companions on the ground who hurled grenades of baked mud from their bags.

"Beetle-bombs!" yelled Tex. "Watch yourselves!"

He thrust one ladder outward, and fired point-blank into a dead-white face. A flying clay ball burst beside the man who fired the nearest ground gun, and in a split second every inch of bare flesh was covered by a sheath of huge scarlet beetles.

Tex's freckled face hardened. The man's screams knifed upward through the thunder of wings. Tex put a bullet carefully through his head and tumbled the body over the parapet. Some of the beetles were shaken off, and he glimpsed bone, already bare and gleaming.

Missiles rained down from above; beetle-bombs, green snakes made worm-size

by starvation. The men were swarming up from the compound now, but the few seconds of delay almost proved fatal.

The aerial attackers were plain in the thinning mist—lightly-built men mounted on huge things that were half bird, half lizard.

The rusty netting jerked, catching the heavy bodies of man and lizard shot down by the guns. Tex held his breath. That net was all that protected them from a concerted dive attack that would give the natives a foot-hold inside the walls.

A gun in A Battery choked into silence. Rust, somewhere in the mechanism. No amount of grease could keep it out.

Breska swore sulphurously and stamped a small green thing flat. Red beetles crawled along the stones—thank God the things didn't fly. Men fought and died with the snakes. Another gun suddenly cut out.

Tex fired steadily at fierce white heads thrust above the parapet. The man next him stumbled against the infested stones. The voracious scarlet flood surged over him, and in forty seconds his uniform sagged on naked bones.

Breska's shout warned Tex aside as a lizard fell on the catwalk. Its rider pitched into the stream of beetles and began to die. Wings beat close overhead, and Tex crouched, aiming upward.

His freckled face relaxed in a stare of utter unbelief.

SHE was beautiful. Pearl-white thighs circling the gray-green barrel of her mount, silver hair streaming from under a snake-skin diadem set with the horns of a swamp-rhino, a slim body clad in girdle and breast-plates of irridescent scales.

Her face was beautiful, too, like a mask cut from pearl. But her eyes were like pale-green flames, and the silver brows above them were drawn into a straight bar of anger.

Tex had never seen such cold, fierce hate in any living creature, even a rattler coiled to strike.

His gun was aimed, yet somehow he couldn't pull the trigger. When he had collected his wits, she was gone, swooping like a stunting flyer through the fire of the guns. She bore no weapons, only what looked like an ancient hunting-horn.

Tex swore, very softly. He knew what that horned diadem meant.

This was the war chief!

The men had reached the parapet just in time. Tex blasted the head from a miniature Tyrannosaurus, dodged the backlash of the spiked tail, and threw down another ladder. Guns snarled steadily, and corpses were piling up at the foot of the wall.

Tex saw the woman urge her flying mount over the pit of the compound, saw her searching out the plan of the place—the living quarters, the water tanks, the kitchen, the radio room.

Impelled by some inner warning that made him forget all reluctance to war against a woman, Tex fired.

The bullet clipped a tress of her silver hair. Eyes like pale green flames burned into his for a split second, and her lips drew back from reptilian teeth, white, small, and pointed.

Then she whipped her mount into a swift spiral climb and was gone, flashing through streamers of mist and powder-smoke.

A second later Tex heard the mellow notes of her horn, and the attackers turned and vanished into the swamp.

As quickly as that, it was over. Yet Tex, panting and wiping the sticky sweat from his forehead, wasn't happy.

He wished she hadn't smiled.

Men with blow-torches scoured the fort clean of beetles and green snakes. One party sprayed oil on the heaps of bodies below and fired them. The netting was cleared, their own dead burned.

Tex, who was a corporal, got his men together, and his heart sank as he counted them. Thirty-two left to guard a fort that should be garrisoned by seventy.

Another attack like that, and there might be none. Yet Tex had an uneasy feeling that the attack had more behind it than the mere attempt to carry the fort by storm. He thought of the woman whose brain had evolved all these hideous schemes—the beetle-bombs, the green snakes. She hadn't risked her neck for nothing, flying in the teeth of four batteries.

He had salvaged the lock of silver hair his bullet had clipped. Now it seemed almost to stir with malign life in his pocket.

Captain John Smith came out of the

radio room. The officer's gaunt face was oddly still, his gray eyes like chips of stone.

"At ease," he said. His pleasant English voice had that same quality of dead stillness.

"Word has just come from Regional Headquarters. The swamp men have attacked in force east of us, and have heavily beseiged Fort Nelson. Our relief column had been sent to relieve them.

"More men are being readied, but it will take at least two weeks for any help to reach us."

TEX heard the hard-caught breaths as the news took the men like a jolt in the belly. And he saw eyes sliding furtively aside to the dense black smoke pouring up from the incinerator, to the water tanks, and to the broken grating.

Somebody whimpered. Tex heard Breska snarl, "Shut up!" The whimperer was Kuna, the young Martian who had stared white-faced at the captain a short while before.

Captain Smith went on.

"Our situation is serious. However, we can hold out another fortnight. Supplies will have to be rationed still further, and we must conserve ammunition and man-power as much as possible. But we must all remember this.

"Help is coming. Headquarters are doing all they can."

"With the money they have," said Breska sourly, in Tex's ear. "Damn the taxpayers!"

". . . and we've only to hold out a few days longer. After all, we volunteered for this job. Jupiter is a virgin planet. It's savage, uncivilized, knowing no law but brute force. But it can be built into a great new world.

"If we do our jobs well, some day these swamps will be drained, the jungles cleared, the natives civilized. The people of Earth and Mars will find new hope and freedom here. It's up to us."

The captain's grim, gaunt face relaxed, and his eyes twinkled.

"Pity we're none of us using our right names," he said. "Because I think we're going to get them in the history books!"

The men laughed. The tension was broken. "Dismissed," said Captain Smith, and strolled off to his quarters. Tex turned to Breska.

The Martian, his leathery dark face set, was gripping the arms of his young countryman, the only other Martian in the fort.

"Listen," hissed Breska, his teeth showing white like a dog's fangs. "Get hold of yourself! If you don't, you'll get into trouble."

Kuna trembled, his wide black eyes watching the smoke from the bodies roll up into the fog. His skin lacked the leathery burn of Breska's. Tex guessed that he came from one of the Canal cities, where things were softer.

"I don't want to die," said Kuna softly. "I don't want to die in this rotten fog."

"Take it easy, kid." Tex rubbed the sandy-red stubble on his chin and grinned. "The Skipper'll get us through okay. He's aces."

"Maybe." Kuna's eyes wandered round to Tex. "But why should I take the chance?' '

He was shaken suddenly by a fit of coughing. When he spoke again, his voice had risen and grown tight as a violin string.

"Why should I stay here and cough my guts out for something that will never be anyway?"

"Because," said Breska grimly, "on Mars there are men and women breaking their backs and their hearts, to get enough bread out of the deserts. You're a city man, Kuna. Have you ever seen the famines that sweep the drylands? Have you ever seen men with their ribs cutting through the skin? Women and children with faces like skulls?

"That's why I'm here, coughing *my* guts out in this stinking fog. Because people need land to grow food on, and water to grow it with."

Kuna's dark eyes rolled, and Tex frowned. He'd seen that same stary look in the eyes of cattle on the verge of a stampede.

"What's the bellyache?" he said sharply. "You volunteered, didn't you?"

"I didn't know what it meant," Kuna whispered, and coughed. "I'll die if I stay here. I don't want to die!"

"What," Breska said gently, "are you going to do about it?"

Kuna smiled. "She was beautiful, wasn't she, Tex?"

The Texan started. "I reckon she was, kid. What of it?"

"You have a lock of her hair. I saw you pick it from the net. The net'll go out soon, like the grating did. Then there won't be anything to keep the snakes and beetles off of us. She'll sit up there and watch us die, and laugh.

"But I won't die, I tell you! I won't!"

He shuddered in Breska's hands, and began to laugh. The laugh rose to a thin, high scream like the wailing of a panther. Breska hit him accurately on the point of the jaw.

"Cafard," he grunted, as some of the men came running. "He'll come round all right."

He dragged Kuna to the dormitory, and came back doubled up with coughing from the exertion. Tex saw the pain in his dark face.

"Say," he murmured, "you'd better ask for leave when the relief gets here."

"*If* it gets here," gasped the Martian. "That attack at Fort Nelson was just a feint to draw off our reinforcements."

Tex nodded. "Even if the varmints broke through there, they'd be stopped by French River and the broken hills beyond it."

A map of Fort Washington's position formed itself in his mind; the stone blockhouse commanding a narrow tongue of land between strips of impassable swamp, barring the way into the valley. The valley led back into the uplands, splitting so that one arm ran parallel to the swamps for many miles.

To fierce and active men like the swamp-dwellers, it would be no trick to swarm down that valley, take Fort Albert and Fort George by surprise in a rear attack, and leave a gap in the frontier defenses that could never be closed in time.

And then hordes of white-haired warriors would swarm out, led by that beautiful fury on the winged lizard, rouse the more lethargic pastoral tribes against the colonists, and sweep outland Peoples from the face of Venus.

"They could do it, too," Tex muttered. They outnumber us a thousand to one."

"And," added Breska viciously, "the lousy taxpayers won't even give us decent equipment to fight with."

Tex grinned. "Armies are always stepchildren. I guess the sheep just never did like the goats, anyhow." He shrugged. "Better keep an eye on Kuna. He might try something."

"What could he do? If he deserts, they'll catch him trying to skip out, if the savages don't get him first. He won't try it."

But in the morning Kuna was gone, and the lock of silver hair in Tex's pocket was gone with him.

FIVE hot, steaming days dragged by. The water sank lower and lower in the tank. Flakes of rust dropped from every metal surface at the slightest touch.

Tex squatted on a slimy block of stone in the compound, trying to forget hunger and thirst in the task of sewing a patch on his pants. Fog gathered in droplets on the reddish hairs of his naked legs, covered his face with a greasy patina.

Breska crouched beside him, coughing in deep, slow spasms. Out under the sagging net, men were listlessly washing underwear in a tub of boiled swamp water. The stuff held some chemical that caused a stubborn sickness no matter what you did to it.

Tex looked at it thirstily. "Boy!" he muttered. "What I wouldn't give for just one glass of ice water!"

"Shut up," growled Breska. "At least, I've quit being hungry."

He coughed, his dark face twisted in pain. Tex sighed, trying to ignore the hunger that chewed his own belly like a prisoned wolf.

Nine more days to go. Food and water cut to the barest minimum. Gun parts rusting through all the grease they could put on. The strands of the net were perilously thin. Even the needle in his hand was rusted so that it tore the cloth.

Of the thirty-one men left after Kuna deserted, they had lost seven; four by green snakes slipped in through broken drain gratings, three by beetle-bombs tossed over the parapet. There had been no further attacks. In the dark, fog-wrapped nights swamp men smeared with black mud crept silently under the walls,

delivered their messages of death, and vanished.

In spite of the heat, Tex shivered. How much longer would this silent war go on? The swamp-men had to clear the fort before the relief column came. Where was Kuna, and why had he stolen that lock of hair? And what scheme was the savage beauty who led these devils hatching out?

Water slopped in the tub. Somebody cursed because the underwear never dried in this lousy climate. The heat of the hidden sun seeped down in stifling waves.

And suddenly a guard on the parapet yelled.

"Something coming out of the swamp! Man the guns!"

Tex hauled his pants on and ran with the others. Coming up beside the lookout, he drew his pistol and waited.

Something was crawling up the tongue of dry land toward the fort. At first he thought it was one of the scaly war-dogs. Then he caught a gleam of scarlet collar-facings, and shouted.

"Hold your fire, men! It's Kuna!"

The grey, stooped thing came closer, going on hands and knees, its dark head hanging. Tex heard Breska's harsh breathing beside him. Abruptly the Martian turned and ran down the steps.

"Don't go out there, Breska!" Tex yelled. "It may be a trap." But the Martian went on, tugging at the rusty lugs that held the postern gate. It came open, and he went out.

Tex sent men down to guard it, fully expecting white figures to burst from the fog and attempt to force the gate.

Breska reached the crawling figure, hauled it erect and over one shoulder, and started back at a stumbling run. Still there was not attack. Tex frowned, assailed by some deep unease. If Kuna had gone into the swamps, he should never have returned alive. There was a trap here somewhere, a concealed but deadly trick.

Silence. The rank mist lay in lazy coils. Not a leaf rustled in the swamp edges.

Tex swore and ran down the steps. Breska fell through the gate and sagged down, coughing blood, and it was Tex who caught Kuna.

The boy lay like a grey skeleton in his arms, the bones of his face almost cutting the skin. His mouth was open. His tongue was black and swollen, like that of a man dying of thirst.

Kuna's sunken, fever-yellowed eyes opened. They found the tub, in which soiled clothing still floated.

With a surge of strength that took Tex completely by surprise, the boy broke from him and ran to the water, plunging his face in and gulping like an animal.

Tex pulled him away. Kuna sagged down, sobbing. There was something wrong about his face, but Tex couldn't think what.

"Won't let me drink," he whispered. "Still won't let me drink. Got to have water." He clawed at Tex. "Water!"

Tex sent someone after it, trying to think what was strange about Kuna, scowling. There were springs of sweet water in the swamps, and even the natives couldn't drink the other. Was it simply the desire to torture that had made them deny the deserter water?

Tex caught the boy's collar. "How did you get away?"

But Kuna struggled to his knees. "Breska," he gasped. "Breska!"

The older man looked at him, wiping blood from his lips. Kuna said something in Martian, retched, choked on his own blood, and fell over. Tex knew he was dead.

"What did he say, Breska?"

The Martian's teeth showed briefly white.

"He said he wished he'd had my guts." His expression changed abruptly. He caught Tex's shoulder.

"Look, Tex! Look at the water!"

WHERE there had been nearly a full tub, there was now only a little moisture left in the bottom. While Tex watched, that too disappeared, leaving the wood dry.

Tex picked up an undershirt. It was as dry as any he'd ever hung in the prairie air, back in Texas. He touched his face. The skin was like sun-cured leather. His hair had not a drop of fog on it.

Yet the mist hung as heavy as ever.

Captain Smith came out of the radio room, looking up at the net and the guns.

Tex heard him mutter, quite unconsciously.

"It's the rust that'll beat us. It's the rust that'll lose us Jupiter in the end."

Tex said, "Captain. . . ."

Smith looked at him, startled. But he never had time to ask what the matter was. The lookout yelled. Wings rushed overhead. Guns chattered from the parapet. The attack was on.

Tex ran automatically for the catwalk. Passing Kuna's crumpled body, he realized something he should have seen at first.

"Kuna's body was dry when he came into the fort. All dry, even his clothes." And then, "Why did the swamp-men wait until he was safely inside and the door closed to attack?"

With a quarter of their guns disabled and two-thirds of their garrison gone, they still held superiority due to their position and powerful weapons.

There was no concerted attempt to force the walls. Groups of white-haired warriors made sallies, hurled beetle-bombs and weighed bags of green snakes, and retired into the mist. They lost men, but not many.

In the air, it was different. The weird, half-feathered mounts wheeled and swooped, literally diving into the gunbursts, the riders hurling missiles with deadly accuracy. And they were dying, men and lizards, by the dozen.

Tex, feeling curiously dazed, fired automatically. Bodies thrashed into the net. Rust flakes showered like rain. Looking at the thin strands, Tex wondered how long it would hold.

Abruptly he caught sight of what, subconsciously, he'd been looking for. She was there, darting high over the melee, her silver hair flying, her body an iridescent pearl in the mist.

Captain Smith spoke softly.

"You see what she's up to, Tex? Those flyers are volunteers. Their orders are to kill as many of our men as possible before they die themselves, but they must fall inside the walls! On the net, Tex. To weaken, break it, if possible."

Tex nodded. "And when it goes. . . ."

"We go. We haven't enough men to beat them if they should get inside the walls."

Smith brushed his small military mustache, his only sign of nervousness. Tex saw him start, saw him touch the bristles wonderingly, then finger his skin, his tunic, his hair.

"Dry," he said, and looked at the fog. "My Lord, dry!"

"Yes," returned Tex grimly. "Kuna brought it back. He couldn't get wet even when he tried to drink. Something that eats water. Even if the net holds, we'll die of thirst before we're relieved."

He turned in sudden fury on the distant figure of the woman and emptied his gun futilely at her swift-moving body.

"Save your ammunition," cautioned Smith, and cried out, sharply.

Tex saw it, the tiny green thing that had fastened on his wrist. He pulled his knife and lunged forward, but already the snake had grown incredibly. Smith tore at it vainly.

Tex got in one slash, felt his knife slip futilely on rubbery flesh of enormous contractile power. Then the venom began to work. A mad look twisted the officer's face. His gun rose and began to spit bullets.

Grimly, Tex shot the gun out of Smith's hand, and struck down with the gun-barrel. Smith fell. But already the snake had thrown a coil round his neck and shifted its grip to the jugular.

Tex sawed at the rubbery flesh. Beaten as though with a heavy whip, he stood at last with the body still writhing in his hand.

Captain Smith was dead, with the snake's jaws buried in his throat.

Dimly Tex heard the mellow notes of the war-chief's horn. The sky cleared of the remnants of the suicide squad. The ground attackers vanished into the swamps. And then the woman whirled her mount sharply and sped straight for the fort.

Puffs of smoke burst around her but she was not hit. Low over the parapet she came, so that Tex saw the pupils of her pale-green eyes, the vital flow of muscles beneath pearly skin.

He fired, but his gun was empty.

She flung one hand high in derisive salute, and was gone. And Breska spoke softly behind Tex.

"You're in command now. And there

are just the fourteen of us left."

TEX stood staring down at the dead and dying caught in the rusty net. He felt suddenly tired; so tired that just standing and looking seemed too much drain on his wasted strength.

He didn't want to fight any more. He wanted to drink, to sleep, and forget.

There was only one possible end. His mouth and throat were dry with this strange new dryness, his thirst intensified a hundredfold. The swamp men had only to wait. In another week they could take the fort without losing a man.

Even with the reduced numbers of the defenders, this fiendish thing would make their remaining water supply inadequate. And then another thought struck him.

Suppose it stayed there, so that even if by some miracle the garrison held out, it made holding the fort impossible no matter how many men, or how much water, there was?

The men were looking at him. Tex let the dead snake drop to the catwalk and vanish under a pall of scarlet beetles.

"Clean up this mess," said Tex automatically. Breska's black eyes were brilliant and very hard. Why didn't the men move?

"Go on," Tex snapped. "I'm ranking officer here now."

The men turned to their task with a queer reluctance. One of them, a big scar-faced hulk with a mop of hair redder far than Tex's, stood long after the others had gone, watching him out of narrowed green eyes.

Tex went slowly down into the compound. There were no breaks in the net, but another few days of rust would finish them.

What was the use of fighting on? If they left, now, they might get out alive. Headquarters could send more men, retake Fort Washington.

But Headquarters didn't have many men. And the woman with the eyes like pale-green flames wouldn't waste any time.

Some falling body had crushed a beetle-bomb caught in the net. The scarlet things were falling like drops of blood on Kuna's body. Tex smiled crookedly. In a few seconds there'd be nothing left of the flesh Kuna had cherished so dearly.

And then Tex rubbed freckled hands over his tired blue eyes, wondering if he were at last delirious.

The beetles weren't eating Kuna.

They swirled around him restlessly, scenting meat, but they didn't touch him. His face showed parchment dry under the whorls of fog. And suddenly Tex understood.

"It's because he's dry. They won't touch anything dry."

Recklessly, he put his own hand down in the scarlet stream. It divided and flowed around it, disdaining the parched flesh.

Tex laughed, a brassy laugh with an edge of hysteria in it. Now that they were going to die anyway, they didn't have to worry about beetle-bombs.

Feet, a lot of them, clumped up to where he knelt. The red-haired giant with the green eyes stood over him, the men in a sullen, hard-faced knot behind him.

The red-haired man, whose name was Bull, had a gun in his hand. He said gruffly,

"We're leavin', Tex."

Tex got up. "Yeah?"

"Yeah. We figure it's no use stayin'. Comin' with us?"

Why not? It was his only chance for life. He had no stake in the colonies. He'd joined the Legion for adventure.

Then he looked at Kuna, and at Breska, thinking of all the people of two worlds who needed ground to grow food on, and water to grow it with. Something, perhaps the ancestor who had died in the Alamo, made him shake his sandy head.

"I reckon not," he said. "And I reckon you ain't, either."

He was quick on the draw, but Bull had his gun already out. The bullet thundered against Tex's skull. The world exploded into fiery darkness, through which he heard Breska say,

"Sure, Bull. Why should I stay here to die for nothing?"

Tex tried to cry out, but the blackness drowned him.

He came to lying on the catwalk. His head was bandaged. Frowning, he opened his eyes, blinking against the pain.

Breska hunched over the nearest gun, whistling softly through his teeth. "The

Lone Prairee." Tex stared incredulously.

"I-I thought you'd gone with the others."

Breska grinned. "I just wasn't as dumb as you. I hung behind till they were all outside, and then I barred the door. I'd seen you weren't dead, and—well, this cough's got me anyway, and I hate forced marches. They give me blisters."

They grinned at each other. Tex said, "We're a couple of damn fools, but I reckon we're stuck with it. Okay. Let's see how long we can fool 'em." He got up, gingerly. "The Skipper had some books in his quarters. Maybe one of 'em would tell what this dry stuff is."

Breska coughed and nodded. "I'll keep watch."

Tex's throat burned, but he was afraid to drink. If the water evaporated in his mouth as it had in Kuna's. . . .

He had to try. Not knowing was worse than knowing. A second later he stood with an empty cup in his hand, fighting down panic.

Half the water had vanished before he got the cup to his mouth. The rest never touched his tongue. Yet there was nothing to see, nothing to feel. Nothing but dryness.

He turned and ran for Captain Smith's quarters.

Hertford's *Jungles of Jupiter,* the most comprehensive work on a subject still almost unknown, lay between Kelland's *Field Tactics* and *Alice in Wonderland.* Tex took it down, leafing through it as he climbed to the parapet.

"Here it is," he said suddenly. " 'Dry Spots. These are fairly common phenomena in certain parts of the swamplands. Seemingly Nature's method for preserving the free oxygen balance in the atmosphere, colonies of ultra-microscopic animalcules spring up, spreading apparently from spores carried by animals which blunder into the dry areas.

" 'These animalcules attach themselves to hosts, inanimate or otherwise, and absorb all water vapor or still water nearby, utilizing the hydrogen in some way not yet determined, and liberating free oxygen. They become dormant during the rainy season, apparently unable to cope with running water. They expand only within definite limits, and the life of each colony runs about three weeks, after which it vanishes.' "

"The rains start in about a week," said Breska. "Our relief can't get here under nine days. They can pick us off with snakes and beetle-bombs, or let us go crazy with thirst, let the first shower clear out the ani—the whatyoucallits, and move in. Then they can slaughter our boys when they come up, and have the whole of Jupiter clear."

Tex told him about Kuna and the beetles. "The snakes probably won't touch us, either." He pounded a freckled fist on the stones. "If we could find some way to drink, and if the guns and the net didn't rust, we might hold them off long enough."

" 'If'," grunted Breska. "If we were in heaven, we wouldn't have to worry."

THE days that followed blurred into a daze of thirst and ceaseless watching. For easier defence, there was only one way down from the parapet through the net. They took the least rusted of the guns and filled the small gap. They could hold out there until they collapsed, or the net gave.

They wasted several quarts of water in vain attempts to drink. Then they gave it up. The final irony of it made Tex laugh.

"Here we are, being noble till it hurts, and it won't matter a damn. The Skipper was right. It's the rust that'll lose us Venus in the end—that, and these Dry Spots."

Food made thirst greater. They stopped eating. They became mere skeletons, moving feebly in sweat-box heat. Breska stopped coughing.

"It's breathing dry air," he said, in a croaking whisper. "It's so funny I could laugh."

A scarlet beetle crawled over Tex's face where he lay beside the Martian on the catwalk. He brushed it off, dragging weak fingers across his forehead. His skin was dry, but not as dry as he remembered it after windy days on the prairie.

"Funny it hasn't taken more oil out of my skin." He struggled suddenly to a sitting position. "Oil! It might work.

Oh, God, let it work! It must!"

Breska stared at him out of sunken eyes as he half fell down the steps. Then a sound overhead brought the Martian's gaze upward.

"A scout, Tex! They'll attack!"

Tex didn't hear him. His whole being was centered on one thing—the thing that would mean the difference between life and death.

Dimly, as he staggered into the room where the oil was kept, Tex heard a growing thunder of wings. He groaned. If Breska could only hold out for a moment.

It took all his strength to turn the spigot of the oil drum. It was empty. All the stuff had been used to burn bodies. Almost crying, Tex crawled to the next one, and the next. It was the fourth drum that yielded black, viscous fluid.

Forcing stiff lips apart, Tex drank.

If there'd been anything in him, he'd have vomited. The vile stuff coated lips, tongue, throat. Outside, Breska's gun cut in sharply. Tex dragged himself to the water tank.

"Running water," he thought. Tilting his head up under the spigot, he turned the tap. Water splashed out. Some of it hit his skin and vanished. But the rest ran down his oil-filmed throat. He felt it, warm and brackish and wonderful, in his stomach.

He laughed, and let go a cracked rebel yell. Then he turned and lurched back outside, toward the steps.

The net sagged to the weight of white-haired warriors and roaring lizards. Breska's gun choked and stammered into silence. Tex groaned in utter agony.

It was too late. The rust had beaten them.

His freckled, oil-smeared face tightened grimly. Drawing his gun, he charged the steps.

"Where the hell did you go?" snarled Breska. "The ammo belt jammed." He grabbed for the other gun set in the narrow gap.

Then it wasn't rust! And Tex realized something else. There were no rust flakes falling from the net.

Something had stopped the rusting. Before, his physical anguish had been too great for him to see that the net strands grew no thinner, the gun-barrels no rustier.

Scraps of the explanation shot through Tex's mind. Breska's cough stopping because the air was dried before it reached his lungs. Dry stone. Dry clothing.

Dry metal! The water-eating organisms kept the surface dry. There could be no rust.

"We've licked 'em, Breska! By God, we've licked 'em!" He shouldered the Martian out of the way, gripped the triggers of the gun. Shouting over the din, he told Breska how to drink, sent him lurching down the steps. He could hold the gap alone for a few minutes.

Looking up, Tex found her, swooping low over the fight, her silver hair flying in the wind. Tex shouted at her.

"You did it! You outsmarted yourself, lady. You showed us the way!"

Scientists could find out how to harness the Dry spots to keep off the rust, and still let the soldiers drink.

And some day the swamps would be drained, and men and women would find new wealth, new life, new horizons here on Jupiter.

Breska came back, grinning, and fought the jam out of the gun. White bodies began to pile up, mixed with the saurian carcasses of their war-dogs. And presently the notes of the war-chief's horn drifted down, and the attackers faded back into the swamps.

And suddenly, wheeling her mount away from the others, the warrior woman swooped low over the parapet. Tex held his fire. For a moment he thought she was going to dash her lizard into them. Then, at the last second, she pulled him up in a thundering climb.

Her face was a cut-pearl mask of fury, but her pale-green eyes held doubt, the beginning of an awed fear. Then she was gone, bent low over her mount, her silver hair hiding her face.

Breska watched her go. "For Mars," he said softly. Then, pounding Tex on the chest until he winced.

Two voices, cracked, harsh, and unmusical, drifted after the retreating form of the white-haired war-chief.

"Oh, bury us not on the lone praire-e-e. . . ."

Staggering over the heaving, shifting bed of stone, Haller felt as though he were in an inferno. The heat was overpowering.

SARGASSO OF THE STARS

By FREDERICK A. KUMMER, Jr.

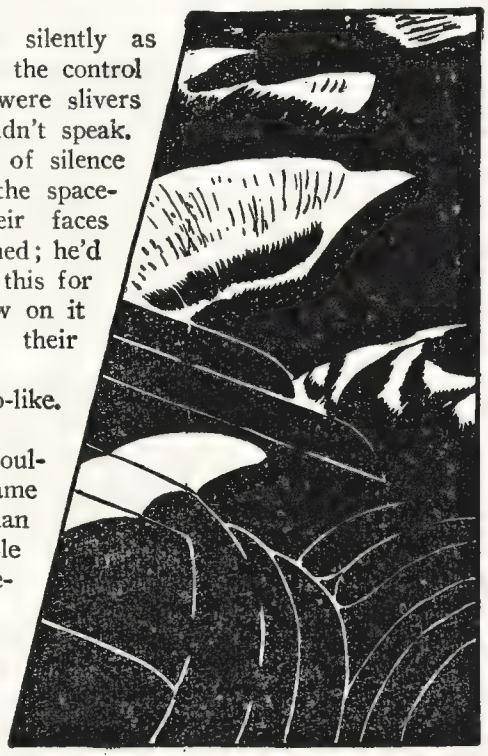
The Spot was the curse of the Universe—a drifting Sargasso of vanished space-ships and soul-lost men.

HALLER watched silently as they crowded into the control room. His eyes were slivers of gray granite, but he didn't speak. There was a long moment of silence as the five men, scum of the space-ports, shifted uneasily, their faces strained, tense. Haller frowned; he'd been expecting something like this for the past few days. From now on it would be his nerve against their strength.

"Well?" he snapped, whip-like. "What is it?"

Carlson, the big engineer, shouldered to the fore. His massive frame and sloping skull betrayed his Jovian blood, even as the scars and purple ray burns on his bulging forearm betrayed a checkered, violent past.

"We want to know where you're taking us!" he rumbled. "Seltzsky here, says it's off the regular lanes. If we're not heading for Jupiter,



where're we going? We got a right to know."

Icy as outer space, Haller surveyed them. The pilots at Mercis had likened him, since the *Cosmic* affair, to a living robot, devoid of all feeling, all emotion. Now, as he stared at the sullen crew, this simile was especially apt. His lean, set face held a curious hardness, as if it had been hammered from steel, and one sensed about him a terrible determination, an unswerving singleness of purpose, found in men who pursue a self-imposed duty rather than the call of adventure. Haller's eyes made one think that he had gazed upon all the worlds, all things that lived, and found them dull, futile.

"So you think you've a right to know where we're bound?" he said deliberately. "You'll recall that I chartered this ship, that you all signed on for three months, no questions asked. However," . . . he smiled unhumorously . . . "since you're so interested, I'll tell you."

Haller turned to the big chart upon the control room's wall, pointed.

"Our present position is about here . . . ten days out of Mars and rather off the regular lanes. Our destination is this." He indicated a shaded area forming the apex of a vague triangle of which Mars and Jupiter were the other angles. "This area is known, for want of a better name, as the Magnetic Spot. Ships passing near it report radio disturbances, variations in their instruments. And that's where we're going! Any more questions?"

"The . . . the Magnetic Spot?" Seltzsky, the wizened little navigator, cried. "But. . . . Good God! Every ship that goes near it disappears! Dozens, hundreds of 'em! The *Valerian,* the *Explorer,* the *Io!* Warships, liners, freighters! You're mad! Only two months ago, the *Cosmic.* . . .

At mention of the *Cosmic* a bitter flame leaped in Haller's eyes. His hand shot to the atomite gun at his waist.

"That's enough!" he barked. "You wanted to find out where you were going, and now you know! Get back to your quarters!"

Carlson and Seltzsky leaned forward, their savage faces intent, fists knotted. Haller's cold gaze did not flicker. For a long moment the tension was like a dark bubble, growing, growing, as it approached the breaking point. Suddenly old Barger, the quartermaster, laughed.

"You're licked!" he grated. "Just as I said you'd be! I'll take one *man,* like Cap'n Haller, to a dozen blustering bullies like you!" He touched his cap, submissively. "To the Magnetic Spot or to hell, sir, if you say so! Come along, you lily-livered space-rats! Back to your stations!"

And then Carlson leaped, his face contorted with rage. Haller's hand gripped the atomite gun, jerked it from its holster, but before he could fire, the engineer's huge fist crashed against his jaw. One moment's glimpse, he had, of Barger going down under the assault of the other spacehands, and then the world went black.

STEVE HALLER came to, to find himself in the closet-like chart room. His hands were bound, and his jaw ached. Barger lay opposite him; the grizzled old quartermaster appeared to be still unconscious. Haller struggled to his knees, peered out of the small observation port. Space . . . silent, intangible, unknown! Stars crawling painfully across the black void, and no one knew what mysteries lurking in the vast reaches between worlds. Like the Magnetic Spot. . . .

Haller turned from the port, his face more like steel than ever. No chance of helping Barger as long as his hands were tied. The ship was silent, and without apparent motion in spite of the speed she was making; it gave one the impression of falling through a dark bottomless pit. Impossible to tell how long he'd been out, but they should be nearing the Magnetic Spot. He swore helplessly. Might have known that crew of space-rats would turn yellow, mutiny. Not that he blamed them so much, after the tales that were told about the Spot. Hundreds of ships, in the course of the past two centuries, had entered it, some fleeing meteor storms or enemy ships in time of war, others deliberately, in hopes of learning its secret. And none had ever returned. The whispered yarns told in spacemen's dives were lurid in their speculations about that strange unknown area.

Haller's thoughts turned to the *Cosmic,* and his eyes grew tortured. Fay Carroll had been aboard the liner. Fay of the

sleek bronze hair, the laughing blue eyes, the curved red lips that were scarlet scimiters, stabbing at men's hearts. Reckless, madcap, with just enough of the devil in her to add piquancy to her charm. And now she was gone. He, Haller, had been to blame. He'd radioed her from Jupiter to meet him there, and she'd taken the first out-going ship, the *Cosmic*. And the *Cosmic,* driven off her course by a meteor storm, had last been reported on the outskirts of the Spot.

Haller moved restlessly, straining against his bonds. The lines about his mouth deepened as the old self-accusation returned to plague him. If he hadn't sent Fay that radiogram, urging her to come to Jupiter, she'd be alive today. For months that one thought had beat like a rocket-blast through his mind. It had changed him from a gay, happy-go-lucky space-pilot to a living robot, had driven him to resign from Trans-Jovian, sink his savings, the money he'd hoped to spend on a home for Fay, in chartering this old tub, the *Lodestar,* and setting out on this vain hope. He'd recruited his crew from the space-dives of Mars, loaded the ramshackle tramp with fuel, and headed for the Magnetic Spot. Not that he'd believed there was any chance of finding Fay, but he'd felt that if he could discover the secret of the Spot, he'd have done his bit toward atoning. Now, thanks to the mutinous crew, even that poor consolation was denied him. Yellow scum of space, without enough guts to venture into the unknown area!

A click of the chart room door drew Haller's gaze. Carlson appeared in the entrance, his great hands gripping an atomite gun, a broad grin on his brutish countenance.

"All right, you two," he grunted. "Come on out! We're going to have a little bull session! Up, you *molat!*" He prodded Barger not too quietly with the toe of his boot.

The quartermaster groaned, swayed to his feet. Dazed, he followed Haller out into the control room. Seltzsky, Wallace, and Kindt stood grouped about the navigator's table, their faces flushed with triumph. A bottle of fiery Martian *tong,* half-empty, stood before them.

"Okay," Carlson barked. "Now you listen to us! If you think we're going into the Magnetic Spot, you're nuts! But long's you're so anxious to see what it's like, you and Barger can go, in one of the life rockets! We'll take this packet to Jupiter, sell it, and whack up the dough! And you can run around the Spot in the life rocket to your heart's content, while your fuel holds out!"

"Life rocket!" Barger growled. "You dirty dogs! They don't carry enough fuel to get us a quarter of the way back to Mars! You can't. . . ."

Carlson laughed, deep in his hairy chest.

"Right!" he said. "We'll be rid of both of you! An unfortunate accident, o' course. We'll be so sorry when we reach Jupiter! We'll think of you cruising around the Spot until you run out of trioxine!" He motioned to the companionway. "We got the life rocket all ready! Get going!"

Haller glanced through a port at the bitter darkness of space. Sent out in a life rocket! No chance of even reaching the ship-lanes in one of the little cylinders! Doomed to drift without control in the void until lack of food, oxygen, brought death!

"Come on!" Seltzsky dug a gun into his back. "Step on it!"

"Wait a minute!" Haller's gaze shifted to the control panel. Suddenly he laughed. "So you're heading for Mars after you get rid of us? Going to try it without instruments?"

"Without instruments?" Seltzsky's beady eyes swung to the illuminated board, and his face went white. The gravity compass and spaceometer were swinging back and forth crazily until they seemed like metronomes!

"The controls! They've gone haywire!" Carlson dropped the bottle of *tong,* made a dive for the radio. "We'll call Mars, pick up a beam." His voice trailed away. The screen of the televisor was a haze of fantastically dancing dots, the speaker gave off a fierce and uninterrupted crackle of static!

"Beginning to enjoy yourselves?" Haller queried lazily. "That's how it got the name of the Magnetic Spot! You waited just a trifle too long before putting the ship about!"

"Huh!" Carlson sprang to the controls.

"The forward rockets'll throw us in reverse! Once we're out of the field, the radio and dials'll come back to normal!" He tugged at levers and the stuttering roar of the forward rockets shook the ship, while through the observation port they could see red flame enveloping her nose.

SLOWLY Carlson drew back on the lever, to ease the shock of deceleration. The cabin was silent, tomb-like, the pressure of braking squeezed the breath from them. Long minutes passed, as notch by notch, the big half-breed drew back the lever. Speed dropped from the *Lodestar* until it merely crept across the heavens. Now the forward rockets were open full, and in another moment the ship should have lost all forward momentum, commenced gathering speed in reverse. Minute after minute passed, but the *Lodestar* continued on ahead at approximately landing speed. Sweat broke out on Carlson's sloping brow.

"Rockets on full!" he muttered. "And she's still going forward! We . . . we're caught in some sort of current, being drawn along."

"Into the Spot!" Haller cried. "Might as well take these ropes off Barger and me, we're all in this together! And if you hadn't slugged me, you might not be in this mess right now!"

The four mutineers were thoroughly cowed, sober, now, their coarse faces drawn with fear. Suddenly Seltzsky gasped. The pocket of his coat was bulging out as though a live thing were in it! He reached down, drew out a pocket knife . . . and the knife showed an amazing inclination to move toward the front of the ship! Seltzsky had all he could do to hang onto it; invisible strings seemed to be trying to tug it from his hand! The others, too, were finding key-rings, metal buckles, drawing toward the front of the ship. A cloud of instruments from the navigator's desk flew forward and plastered themselves against the front wall of the cabin! Carlson's gun popped from its holster, crashed against the wall, stuck there!

"It. . . . It's screwy!" Kindt whimpered. "It ain't human!"

"Simple!" Haller laughed unhumorously. "Magnetism! Magnetism stronger than any ever imagined! It's got the ship in its grip!" He twisted his bound hands. "Let us loose, you fools! We're all in the same boat!"

With an effort Seltzsky cut the two men's bonds. A moment later as he relaxed his grip, the knife clanged against the forward wall of the cabin. At that instant, Carlson, peering through the glass-sex port, gave a fierce, terrified cry. Ahead and below them, weird in the light of the flaring red rockets, was a rocky rubble-strewn plain! Only an instant's glimpse of it, Haller had, before the loud, grinding crash, throwing him heavily to the floor!

IT was some minutes before the stunned Haller picked himself up. The *Lodestar* was bumping about, tossing, like a ship at sea. A scraping, crashing sound filled her hull, and the roar of the exhausts sounded like continuous thunder. Barger got unsteadily to his feet and staggered to the controls.

"It . . . it's a planetoid of some sort!" he muttered. "The magnetism holds us down, but the force of the rockets is grinding us forward over the rocks! It'll rip open our plates!" He made a grab for the rocket-control, but the rolling, tossing motion of the *Lodestar* balked him, throwing him against the wall.

Suddenly Haller, peering through the port, gave a cry of wonder. The blinding glare of the forward rockets, driving them in reverse across the rubbled plain, prevented him from seeing anything nearby, while further off, the darkness hung like a pall. In the distance, however, a line of light had become suddenly visible . . . pale, orange light, stretching across the close horizon! Brighter and brighter it grew, as the shuddering, bumping vessel ground over the little planetoid's strangely rough surface.

"What . . . what is it?" Seltzsky muttered. "It's like a great fire across half of this crazy world!" His face showed fear.

Haller stared, then realization gripped him. They were on the unknown world's darkside, and the line of light indicated its sunside.

His face cleared.

"Sunlight!" he exclaimed. "That's the day side of this chunk of rock! Leave the

rockets on, 'til we reach it, Barger! Another mile won't make much difference now, and if we can see where we are, we may be able to do something about it!"

Barger nodded doubtfully and the *Lodestar* continued to grind ahead toward the line of sunlight. The four mutineers had lost all their bluster; cringing against the wall, they gazed at Haller as though expecting him to find some way out of this mad place. They had been brave, out in open space, but now, face to face with the unknown, they instinctively sought his leadership.

Onward the *Lodestar* ploughed, held down by the strange magnetism, driven forward by her rockets. At the edge of the dawn-like light, however, there came a staggering shock, as the vessel glanced against a mammoth boulder, and one of the stout glassex ports starred, and then shattered.

"God!" Carlson gave a rising, bubbling cry of terror. "Broken! Our air. . . ."

But there was no hiss of escaping air, no awful suffocation. Haller, who had torn off his coat to stuff into the gap, paused, eyes narrowed. A strange sharp odor had permeated the control room, and he felt an odd exhilaration.

"Air!" Kindt muttered. "Air! Thin, but with a high oxygen content! It's safe out there! Safe!"

"Right!" Old Barger cried exultantly. "We can go out, have a look around!" He snapped shut the flaring exhausts, sprang quickly toward an airlock. "Come on! Let's go!"

"Wait a minute!" Haller turned to the wall against which the atomite gun had been held. Now that the magnetic center was beneath them, the collection of iron and steel objects had fallen to the floor. With an effort Haller wrenched the gun free, thanking his stars that only the trigger and recoil mechanism were of steel. Even so, the weapon, drawn groundward, seemed to weigh pounds. Gripping it, Haller opened the massive doors of the airlock, swung through.

The sight that greeted his gaze defied comparison. The entire surface of the little world was deep with uneven, jagged rocks, roughly spherical in shape. Some of vast size, larger than a space-ship, some no bigger than marbles, they appeared to have fallen like hailstones upon the asteroid's surface, covering it to an unknown depth. Peering between two of the larger stones, Haller could see a crevasse of appalling deepness, and below it, more or the loose rounded rocks. How large the original planetoid was, he could not imagine, but it was evident that for millenniums its magnetic attraction had been collecting about it meteors, most of which have a high ferrous content, drawing them to it and increasing its size. The little world was like a spider . . . a spider of space . . . catching all ferrous objects in its magnetic field, sucking them to it, fattening on them! Meteors, spaceships, iron-permeated cosmic dust . . . all were drawn inexorably to it!

Queer as was this great top-layer of meteoric stone, it received only a passing glance from the crew of the *Lodestar*. Their gaze was fixed on the gleaming, cylindrical shapes that lay scattered over the rocky, gray plain. In the weird half-light dozens of them could be seen, large and small. Spaceships! Spaceships of every size, sort, and description! The surface of the tiny world was littered with them, some half-buried beneath meteoric stone, some hopelessly wrecked, some, like the *Lodestar* intact.

Haller and his companions stared in awed wonder at the scene. Space-craft of every type, every era. Great liners, all burnished chrome and glass; sleek cruisers, heavily armored, their big ray-guns peeping through open ports; rusty, battered freighters; old vessels of the design of a century, two centuries before, with their archaic wind-vanes and detachable rockets. The names inlaid upon their sides were keys to countless mysteries of the void. Here was the long-lost *Tycho,* vanished off Jupiter with a billion dollars' worth of polonium in her holds; here, the ancient *Explorer* which had headed for the outer planets two hundred years before, and never returned; here, the battle-cruiser *Valiant,* long since given up for lost, and upon which the last remains of Commander Lane, hero of the Venusian wars, must lie. Ship after ship, venturing too near the Spot, caught in its magnetic field, drawn to the tremendously magnetized surface of this grasping, spider-like little world.

"The Isle of Lost Space-ships!" Barger gasped. "Great Cosmos! Must be hundreds of 'em, scattered over the surface, caught by the chunk of lodestone that's at the center of these ferrous meteors!"

Haller nodded.

"Steel ships and magnetic field," he said somberly. "The asteroid proper, within this layer of steel and iron it's attracted, must have tremendous power. Still, even back in the 20th century they had alloys which, when permanently magnetized, could do fancy tricks. A piece the size of your thumbnail would support two hundred pounds. Plenty powerful. And this planetoid must be of similar stuff." He grinned crookedly. "Seems as if the secret of the Magnetic Spot's solved. Not that we'll ever get back to tell it. We're caught like the others." Haller glanced at the battered, dust-covered ships strewing the rubbled plain, and then suddenly the set, robot-like look faded from his face. Pale, tense, he stared at a big liner that bulked against the horizon.

Wheeling, Haller sprang into the ship, returned with a pair of powerful field-glasses. For a long moment he focused them upon the vessel when he spoke, his voice shook.

"It's the . . . the *Cosmic!* And Fay . . ." Abruptly he spun about, barking orders. "I'm going to find out if anyone's left alive aboard her. Barger, you and Kindt'll come with me! You others stay here and keep watch over the ship! No telling what dangers we're liable to run into in this screwy world! All set? Let's go!"

Followed by Barger and Kindt, he set out toward the wrecked liner. The going was rough, uncertain, over the great jagged meteors. They were forced to leap from rock to rock, skirt huge meteorites. Small stones rolled and slipped under their feet and once Barger fell through a space between two of the dark ferrous rocks, was saved only by gripping a projecting ledge, hanging on with torn hands until the others dragged him up to safety.

SLIDING, stumbling over the rubble, Haller kept his gaze on the *Cosmic.* The liner was badly battered, her nose crumpled as if she had crashed on landing. Haller forged ahead grimly through the gray half-light of the twilight zone that lay between darkside and sunside of the mad little world. Past ship after ship they toiled, rusty freighters, queer century-old exploring craft, gaunt skeletons of vessels half-buried in the débris.

No signs of life were visible aboard the *Cosmic* as they drew near. Haller's face was a strained mask.

"Cap'n!" Barger paused, his gray-stubbled face drawn. "Look! Out there!"

Haller turned, staring, but there was nothing to be seen except the shattered rocks, the desolate, silent ships.

"Well?" he said sharply. "What was it?"

"Thought I saw something moving over yonder," Barger muttered. "Queer-looking figure that was human and still wasn't. Nerves, I guess, or this damned shadowy light."

"Sure. Nerves." Haller moved ahead impatiently. What would he find aboard the *Cosmic?* What had happened to those on the wrecked vessel?

The silent, dust-shrouded liner loomed above them, now. One of her airlocks was curiously fused, blackened, and nearly twisted from its masive hinges. Haller seized the flush-sunk ring bolt and, followed by his companions, drew himself into the ship.

The *Cosmic's* main saloon was a scene of desolation. The crash landing had hurled furniture, bric-a-brac, luxurious decorations into a jumbled heap. Amidst this shattered débris lay several gaunt skeletons, clad in the uniform of the Trans-Jovian line.

"Funny!" Kindt muttered. "Look!" He pointed to the atomite guns clutched in the bony hands. "Why guns?"

"Mutiny, maybe," Haller said with grim emphasis. "Common failing, it seems! Let's go on!"

They moved along the companionway, toward the rear of the ship. Dark, silent, there was something eerie about the deserted vessel. Like a ghost ship, it seemed, a weird metal tomb. Already rust was beginning to flake the walls, and a moldering smell of decomposition filled the air. The footsteps of the three men echoed hollowly along the dank corridors, and in the light of Barger's *astralux* torch, grotesque shadows slid along the walls. Death.

decay, hung like a pall about the *Cosmic* and Haller, thinking of Fay, was a tight-lipped specter.

"Kind of gives me the creeps, this packet," Barger muttered. "We . . ." He broke off, listening. "Did you hear something just then? Like soft footsteps?"

"More nerves," Haller grunted. "Come on!"

Onward they went, examining staterooms, engine-rooms, galley. All at once Haller began to realize that things were missing from the ship. Here, a skeleton stripped of its garments; there, a bed minus its mattress and covers; there, sections of wire, lighting equipment, removed. Reaching the ship's storeholds, they found the shelves swept bare of food.

"She's been cleaned out," Barger said hoarsely. "Looks like the survivors took everything they might need, lit out for parts unknown."

"Maybe," Haller was doubtful. "But from the number of skeletons, there weren't many survivors. And where'd they go?" A picture of Fay crossed his mind as he spoke. Was hers one of these whitened, grinning skulls, or had she been among those who for some reason had abandoned the *Cosmic?* Memory of the girl's slender loveliness tortured him.

"Might's well go back," Kindt said uneasily. "I don't like this ship. There's something damned wrong here."

KINDT'S voice trailed off into silence. At one end of the storeroom were several barrels, empty, their contents of wine having apparently been used by the passengers of the *Cosmic* on the trip out. And from behind these barrels a faint, strange babbling sound came, as of a mad delirious thing, haunted by fear. For just a second the voice rose, shrill, eerie, then ceased abruptly as though choked to silence. Listening, Haller felt the hair at the back of his neck stiffen. Then he leaped forward, tugged the barrels aside. Deep in the shadows was a small door. Muscles standing out in ridges, Haller ripped it open.

The space thus revealed was a small airlock, perhaps four feet square, through which refuse was expelled. In its chamber two indistinct forms were huddled. One was a girl, and the other a gray-bearded man, his hand over his companion's mouth. As the door opened, the man plunged forward, his face contorted in desperation, in frenzy, as if he had determined to go down fighting Catching sight of the spaceman, however, a look of stunned disbelief crossed his countenance, his arms dropped to his sides.

"Earthmen!" he croaked. "Earthmen!" Then something seemed to snap within him and he began to sob like a weary child.

Haller paid scant heed to the man. Pale as a ghost, he stared at the girl. Emaciated, she seemed feverish, but in spite of her changed appearance, there was no mistaking that bronze hair, blue eyes, and slender form. Haller felt as though he had swallowed a lump of lead.

"Fay!" he whispered. "Fay!"

The girl swayed to her feet, gazed at him a moment, then gave a queer high laugh.

"But it's a dream," she said slowly. "I know it's another dream. Because Steve is on Jupiter where there're houses, people." Abruptly the girl's voice broke; her knees buckled and she collapsed in a heap on the store-hold floor.

Haller picked the girl up, turned to Barger.

"Got to get her to the *Lodestar,*" he snapped. "Needs food and water. Here, you," rather abruptly he shook the bearded man, "what's this all about?"

"About?" the man repeated dully. "We were hiding from Them. All the other men went down fighting, and the women were taken prisoner. I was unarmed and there wasn't any use fighting so many. This girl and I ran down here to the hold, hid in the airlock. For weeks and weeks. At first we could slip out and get food from the shelves but every day They came and carried some away and now there isn't any more." His voice trailed off into a senseless, tuneless crooning.

"They?" Haller shook him again. "Who're They?"

"Beasts, ghosts, devils." The man shuddered. "I don't know. They come shining, shining through the darkness and their eyes . . ."

"Nuts," Barger said succinctly. "Help him, Kindt. I'll carry the girl, Cap'n,

long as you've got the gun. May need it if this guy's anywhere near the truth."

"Right." With the heavy magnetized flashlight in one hand, the gun in the other, Haller led the way from the hold, followed by Barger, carrying Fay, and Kindt, aiding the bearded man. At the base of the ladder leading to the main deck, Haller froze in his tracks. Above them, in the cabin, the sound of running footsteps was audible along with queer, inhuman voices. Others had boarded the wrecked *Cosmic,* were rushing down the companionway!

"Quick!" Barger roared. "Get that door!"

Hardly had Barger's voice died away when there came a series of wild howls, a thud of racing feet. The door leading from the upper deck burst open and a score of nightmare figures leaped into the room. Human, they were, yet at the same time, grim travesties on human beings. Clad in rags, hair long and matted, beards streaked with filth, they seemed the most degenerate, revolting dregs of mankind. More beasts than men, they rushed forward with hoarse shouts of triumph. What shook Haller more than anything else was the queer aura of light that appeared to emanate from their bodies! The attackers were vaguely phosphorescent!

With an effort Haller swung up the magnetized atomite gun, fired. The blue bolt of energy tore through the ranks of the insane attackers and three of them slumped to the floor, charred, blackened corpses. Smoke and a stench of burnt flesh filled the storeroom. The maddened figures also had ray guns; the bearded man who had been in hiding with Fay toppled backward, torn by an atomite blast. Like hideous, human wolves, the phosphorescent figures swept on, bearing Kindt and Barger to the floor. As Haller's flash fell to the floor, shattered, the greenish light from their bodies lit up the hold with a queer, eerie luminescence.

Two of the wild-eyed specters plunged at Haller. The atomite gun blasted one of them to bits, but the other's clutching, taloned hands locked about his knees in mad fury, sent him reeling to the floor. Haller's head banged against the steel plates, the gun fell from his grip, and the gnarled, steely hands shifted from his knees to his throat. Dazed, he tried to fight back, but found he was no match for the other's inhuman strength. The distorted eldritch face, with reddened eyes peering through a tangle of hair, began to blur before his gaze, fire-flecked darkness slowly engulfed him. Faintly he could hear Kindt and Barger making strangled, choking sounds, realized that he was doing the same. No escape now, he realized. In another minute . . .

A MILLION miles away Steve Haller heard the deep guttural voice, and miraculously the pressure on his windpipe ceased. As vision returned, he could see a huge, scarred man with an embryonic degenerate face, standing on the bottom step of the ladder. Vaguely glowing like the others, he made a ghostly figure in the darkness.

"Let them live," he grunted. "We got things to find out." He bent, dragged the dazed Kindt to his feet. "Which ship is yours?"

"The . . . *Lodestar,*" Kindt whispered through bruised lips. "She lies over that way about a mile. The magnetism caught us."

"So." The big man's sub-human face expressed satisfaction. "More food and fuel. This has been a good time, eh, Doul? First this liner with food and women, now another ship and" . . . he glanced at Fay's inert form . . . "another woman. Take six men with guns and see how strongly this new arrival is held."

Watching the six repulsive figures depart, Haller felt suddenly sick. The liner, the big man said, had furnished them with food and women. Fay . . . Weakly he swayed to his feet.

"What's this all about?" he demanded. "Who are you?"

"Castaways, or their children's children." The huge figure looked spectral in the weird light that emanated from his skin. "No one leaves the Island of Lost Spaceships. I'm Orth. My people were wrecked many lifetimes ago, mated with the female passengers of the refugee ship, *Transvalia.* We rule here." He motioned his savage followers forward. "We will go now."

Half-strangled, throat aching, Haller felt himself seized by two of the savage

beings, dragged along with Kindt and Barger to the upper deck. One of the phosphorescent figures had thrown Fay over his shoulder, was carrying her like a sack of meal. Through the airlock they were forced and out onto the rough, meteor-heaped surface of the planetoid.

"Haller! Look!" Barger turned toward the distant *Lodestar;* three, figures, hands raised, were emerging from the metal hull. "The yellow rats! Not even putting up a scrap! They might have held the ship indefinitely against these brutes!"

Orth, the semi-simian leader of these denizens of the asteroid. was waving toward the band which had taken the *Lodestar.* These returned across the rubbled plain shouting jubilantly, with their captives. Carlson, Seltzsky, and Wallace were pale phantoms, cringing under the blows that urged them forward. Joining forces, the two parties set out across the rocky surface, led by the giant Orth.

Stumbling along between his captors, Haller found it hard to believe that this was not some mad dream. A magnetic asteroid, an Isle of Lost Spaceships, and humans who had degenerated into beasts. Covertly he studied their guards. Most of them were unnaturally squat, bow-legged, and were a startling example of how swiftly evolution can retrogress. Millenniums of progress, all the civilization so painfully acquired by man, had dropped from them. Faces crude and unintelligent, they spoke in hoarse gutturals, hardly intelligible. And even here, in the half-light of the plain, the uncanny green glow, like fox-fire, hung about their forms. Living ghosts, they seemed, walking through a twilight zone of death and desolation.

Over the rough terrain they led their captives, skirting crevasses, craters, leaping sure-footedly from rock to rock. And on all sides lay the battered hulks, looted of their food and cargoes by these strange beings, left to rust away or be buried by new rains of meteors. The barren melancholy of the scene pressed like leaden weights upon the captured earthmen.

At a mound of huge meteors rising above the plain, Orth, the herculean leader, turned. A narrow gap was visible between two great stones. Into this he plunged, his faintly glowing body giving wan light.

"Caves," Kindt muttered, glancing about. "Some job, too. Wonder why they didn't just live in the spaceships outside?"

Haller studied the passages. They had been made by removing loose fragments of the meteors, and were clumsily shored up by plates and girders from the wrecked ships. Enormous effort must have been required to drag the steel supports across the surface of this magnetized world, though perhaps by heating them it might have been possible. But why, when the ships offered luxurious accommodations, was it necessary to dig this rabbit-warren into the layer of meteors that covered the surface?

Downward they went, the bodies of their captors lighting up the rocky galleries. Now voices were audible ahead, the corridor was widening. Rounding a bend in the passage, Haller drew a sudden sharp breath.

BEFORE them lay a vast cavern, crowded with bizarre figures. There were at least half a hundred of the bearded savage men, their skin giving off the greenish luminescence. Among them were four or five less uncouth looking individuals, wearing the uniform of Trans-Jovian. Some of the *Cosmic's* crew, apparently, had joined the renegades. What struck Haller, however, was the difference among the women. Some were ragged, dirty creatures, almost as neanderthal in appearance as the men, clutching ugly children to their breasts. But the other women huddled in the cavern brought harsh lines to Haller's face. Earthwomen, these, and of pure blood, some young, some approaching middle age, but all with horror stamped upon their features.

As Orth and his men swaggered into the cavern, an admiring throng ran to greet them.

"Another freighter caught in the field," he grunted. "More food aboard her! No shortage, now! And a new woman for one of us!" He motioned toward Fay, a wan, pale figure in the sickly glow that issued from her captors' fetid bodies.

"For one of you!" Haller hardly recognized his own voice. For months he had been a living robot, condemning himself for the girl's death, and now that miraculously he had found her, she was to be

claimed by one of these degenerate sub-men! Suddenly all the pent-up emotion of those long months burst its bonds; he felt himself surging forward, a red mist before his eyes.

Lean and muscular as he was, Haller was no match for the mighty Orth. A glowing hand shot out, gripped him, held him as helpless as a child. And Barger, who had followed blindly at his heels, was seized by another of the sub-men. The other four men of the *Lodestar's* crew made no move to join in the hopeless struggle and Haller, berserk, cursed them in the worst language of six planets.

"Fools, these two," Orth grunted. "Take them away!"

Helpless in the grip of the green-glowing creatures, Haller and Barger were dragged from the big cavern, along passages that wound deep into the heap of meteoric stone. Here and there, in the weird light, they could see other caves, apparently sleeping, living quarters, furnished with equipment taken from stranded ships. Once again Haller found himself wondering why these people buried themselves deep in the ground when they might have lived aboard one of the big luxury liners. Then thoughts of Fay crossed his mind again and he struggled vainly to be free.

At the end of one of the passages a large tank, perhaps ten feet in diameter, was sunk flush in the loose rubble. A circular iron plate in its top, sucked down by the inexorable magnetism, required the combined efforts of four of the sub-men to remove. The plate at last dragged aside, they motioned their two captives forward. For just a moment Haller hesitated, but with an atomite gun digging into his back, there was no choice. Gripping the edge of the opening he lowered himself into the tank. The drop of about six feet was jarring and he had just time to move aside as Barger landed beside him. A moment later the glowing sub-men had dragged the magnetized iron plate over the opening.

THE interior of the metal tank that served as their prison was dark, except for a faint greenish fluorescence, like that which emanated from the renegade earthmen, visible in one corner. Moving toward it, Haller saw a copper vessel filled with water, apparently for the use of prisoners.

"Barger!" he exclaimed. "That's why they give off that green light! It's the water! Phosphorescent water! We've seen it on earth often, caused by microscopic animal life! Only this is so full of the stuff that by drinking it, a living person becomes phosphorescent also! Like the deep-sea fish on earth! The human body's over eighty per cent water, remember!"

"Interesting," the old quartermaster grunted, biting off a quid of blue Jovian *tole*. "But hardly helpful." He spat noisily. "What next?"

Haller disregarded the question. "I'm beginning to get a clear picture of this," he announced. "For millenniums this little asteroid drew about it ferrous meteors. Then, two hundred years ago, man perfected the spaceship. Since then, this has become the Isle of Lost Spaceships. Hundreds of vessels, venturing too near, were caught in the field, drawn down. I can imagine the men on the first ship, half-mad, starved, before another was drawn down by the field, plundering the new arrivals of their food and supplies, killing their crews. Orth mentioned the *Transvalia*. She was the ship chartered by some fanatical religious sect who were going to found a new world. Also, she had women aboard. That was the start of this degenerate race. Two centuries of savagery, piracy, and we've seen the result." He paused grimly. "They're strong but stupid. That's our only chance. Also we haven't drunk any of this water and aren't fluorescent. That means we've a good chance of getting by unseen in these caves, once we get out of this tank."

"And then, I suppose," Barger grinned, "we build an aluminum spaceship that isn't affected by magnetism and take off. Or do we thumb a ride on a comet?"

By way of answer Haller commenced to examine their prison. A large cylinder, of a bronze-like alloy, it had no openings except the one at the top, covered by the steel plate.

"Thought this had a familiar look to it," he announced. "It's the fuel tank of an old-style rocket-ship. Here! Climb up on my shoulders and have a look at the top. Might be an intake valve or loose

plate up there. Can't see in this light."

"The optimist," Barger grunted. "Steady now! Ah! Wait'll I light a match."

A match flared in the darkness above and Barger shook his head. "Not a sign of an out up here," he muttered. "Looks like we're in storage for keeps. We . . . Look out!"

Barger leaped, and Haller fell in a heap upon the floor. Something small, flaring white-hot, had dropped from the top of the tank, was sputtering on the floor plates. A moment later it winked out, but where it had lain, a small hole, the size of a man's finger, was visible.

"A hole!" Barger exclaimed. "Burnt right through the metal! What in hell . . ."

"Don't you see?" A tight-lipped grin crossed Haller's face. "This was, as I said, a fuel tank. Little drops of tri-oxine have dried on the top, years ago when it was drained, and your match ignited one! When you think how the toughest steel rocket tube linings burn through in a year or less, it's no wonder this bronze alloy melts!" He snatched up the jar of phosphorescent water, held it near the wall of the tank. Here and there tiny brown globules were visible, dried rocket-fuel, like sap on a tree's bark.

"Okay," said Barger, unimpressed. "But how are you going to hold it against the top while it's burning through? Soon as it's lit, it falls . . . and I don't want to be beneath, thanks."

"What's wrong with the floor?" Haller was already scraping the bits of dried fuel from the walls. "The whole top strata of this asteroid is like a heap of stones. The small fragments we can lug into this tank through the hole, and the big ones don't fit so close that we can't squeeze between them! Get busy!"

Slowly from walls and roof they collected the bits of long-dried fuel. A globule here, a flake there, it was painfully slow work. At the end of an hour they had a double handful of the brown crystals.

"Enough for a try, anyhow," Haller muttered. "Let's see!" He arranged the brown grains in a circle perhaps two feet in diameter. "Stand clear! Here goes!"

A match flickered in the darkness, described a short arc as Haller tossed it toward the circle. At once a ring of lurid fire flared up and a searing gust of heat swept through the metal tank. For only a moment it burned, then died away, leaving the floor plates around it a cherry red. Barger, staring, gave a cry of triumph.

"Worked!" he exclaimed. "Burned through!" He poured a portion of the phosphorescent water on the bronze, watched clouds of steam arise.

"Now the work starts!" Haller's grin was fierce. Kicking aside the metal disc that had been melted from the floor, he peered into the opening. Small stones, chunks of meteoric rock, lay beneath.

LARGELY ferrous, the stones were caught in the grip of the asteroid's magnetic core. It required the combined efforts of both men to lift them through the opening into their prison. At the end of half an hour they were drenched with sweat, and the hole beneath was only four feet deep.

"No . . . no use!" Old Barger panted. "We can go on like this indefinitely. And if we try to tunnel sidewise it'll fall on us."

"But we ought to reach the big meteorites soon," Haller muttered. "They'd have settled lower and will have open spaces between them. And the sub-men have this place honeycombed with passages. If we hit one . . ."

"About as much chance as a snowball on Mercury," the quartermaster wheezed. "Hold the water jar near. I'm going to have a look."

Haller held the jar close to the opening so that its green glow faintly illuminated the pit they had dug. Barger, his face red from exertion, jumped into the excavation.

"Stones and more stones," he grunted. "Might dig the rest of our lives before we struck anything. I . . ."

A rumble of rock, a smothered cry, and the grizzled quartermaster disappeared from view!

"Barger!" Steve shouted. "What happened? Are you hurt?"

"Bruised up a bit." The answer echoed hollowly. "And I can't see where I am!"

"Okay, sit tight." Haller knotted his belt to his leather jacket, lowered the half-empty jug of phosphorescent water into the opening. When Barger announced its safe arrival, he made one end of the improvised rope fast, climbed down it.

In the faint green glow a hollow, be-

tween two immense meteorites, was visible. Barger, dirty, disheveled, glanced about.

"The opening seems to run back aways," he announced. "Want to try it?"

"Right." Haller led the way, testing each step carefully. As they moved on, the tunnel narrowed, and they were forced to crawl. Haller, creeping under the overhang of a huge stone, felt like an ant moving through the spaces in a mound of cannon-balls. Now they were forced to dig again, dragging aside the magnetized rocks, holding their breaths for fear of a cave-in. They had made their way perhaps a hundred feet when Haller pulled up short. His hands had encountered something smooth, cold!

"Metal!" he exclaimed. "Wait!" Quickly he raised the vessel of luminous water. Before them, buried beneath massive rocks, was a rusty, ancient spaceship!

"Lord!" Barger stared at the archaic forward rocket tubes. "The great granddaddy of all spaceships!" He pointed to a gaping crack in the battered hull. "Let's see what's inside!"

Squeezing through the crack, they found themselves in a dusty, old-fashioned cabin. Two skeletons lay sprawled upon the floor, moldering clothes hanging on their bones. Haller picked up a yellowed book, studied the all but illegible writing. ". . . caught on the barren sargasso-like world. Magnetism holding us here. Radio blanketed, last food eaten three days ago. No hope. Jameson died today. Too weak to write more. Donovan closing this log. July 17, 1994."

"Poor devils!" Haller muttered. "But" . . . he thought of their savage captors, of Fay, and his face hardened . . . "maybe they were lucky! Nineteen-ninety-four! That'd be before Orth's forefathers, before the *Transvalia!* No wonder it's been completely covered by meteors!"

Barger, poking about the cabin, suddenly gave a grunt, came up with two L-shaped black objects.

"Guns!" he exclaimed. "Old-time lead-throwers! But they'd be better than nothing!"

Rather curiously Haller examined the weapons. Scraping dried oil from the mechanism, he thrust one into his belt.

"May help," he murmured. "If we ever get out of here. Maybe if there's any fuel left, we may blast our way through to one of the caves." Haller moved to the rear of the ship, studied the rusty engines. The fuel tanks were empty, every drop apparenty having been used in a vain effort to break the magnetic grip.

"Nothing here," he muttered. "Dead end. Might as well go back and try these lead throwers on our guards when . . . and if . . . they open the top of that tank. Unless . . ." Suddenly Haller broke off, leaning forward, face intent. Very dimly, far away, the sound of hoarse, shouting voices was audible!

"Orth and his gang!" Barger muttered. "But it's not coming from the passage we made! Seems to be in that direction!" He motionel toward the rubble behind the ancient ship.

"We're near one of their caves!" Haller leaped toward the rear rocket tubes, forced open a massive breech-block. "Come on!"

Into the big exhaust tube he dove, crawling through it as though it had been a drain pipe.

"Take the rocks as I pass them back," he ordered. Then, chuckling grimly, "Makes you feel like Dante's tunneling under the Chateau D'If. Here comes a big one!" He shoved a chunk of meteor back along the tube.

The heap of stones in the old engine room had grown large when Haller saw the light ahead. A pale trickle of illumination, it filtered through the loose rocks. Haller wormed his way nearer, peered through the opening . . . and his face went gray.

A CAVE, its brilliant lights dimming the glow of luminous bodies, lay before them. Well furnished from looted ships, auxiliary engines from some plundered liner, run by rocket fuel, supplied electricity to power the great arc lights that hung from the ceiling. One entire end of the room was an Aladdin's cave of treasures. Bars of gold, from the mines of Saturn, stacked in towering heaps . . . leaden chests of radium, uranium, polonium, a nation's ransom of the stuff for which men died in the great fields of Venus . . . and jewels, huge Martian rubies, big as pigeon's eggs, flame-colored *kàrnites* of Io, even the rare *crystolex* that collects, absorbs, light, until it gives off a

diffused pink aura. Loot of a hundred vessels that had met their doom on this Island of Lost Spaceships, utterly worthless on the barren asteroid, yet hoarded because of the legend that they were prized on other worlds, because lure of treasure lingered in the savage minds of the sub-men.

Incalculable as was this treasure, Haller gave it but a passing glance. His gaze was fixed on the glowing, hideous figures grouped about the cave. With them were Carlson, Seltzsky, Wallace, and Kindt . . . renegades, joining these inhuman brutes, fearing the consequences of refusal. In the center of the cave stood Orth, a gigantic, semi-simian figure, his herculean body shining like a cat's eye, and beside him stood Fay. All the joyousness, the gayety, the beauty, that had bedeviled Haller's memories, were gone from the girl. Pale, emaciated, worn by constant fear, she seemed scarcely aware of her surroundings, stood there like a sleepwalker.

"I claim the new woman!" Orth boomed, his guttural voice echoing through the cavern. "Does anyone dispute it?"

For a long moment there was silence, then a repulsive, embryonic creature, nearly as big as the leader, stepped forward.

"You have another woman!" he growled. "I claim this one!"

A roar went up from the sub-men. "Let strength decide! Fight!"

Orth grinned, advanced toward the center of the cave to meet his opponent. Unarmed, barehanded, they circled one another, uttering strange animal-like sounds. All at once the second claimant hurtled forward, aloned fingers clutching for Orth's eyes. He risked all in that one frenzied charge but the leader of the sub-men saw it coming, moved his head. The claw-like fingers raked his cheek, drawing blood, but missed his eyes. In that instant Orth sprang to the attack. Seizing his opponent about the waist, he lifted him high with one titanic burst of energy, slammed him to the rocky floor. There was a sharp, sickening crack, and the man lay still.

"So!" Orth roared. "Do any others claim the new woman? I, Orth . . ."

Which was as far as he got. An ancient pistol roared, filling the cave with noise. and the glowing giant spun about twice, toppled to the floor. Before the stunned sub-men could recover from their surprise, there was a rumbling of dirt and stone, and a section of the cavern's wall gave way in a cloud of dust. Two wild-eyed figures, torn, ragged, furious, their archaic weapons gleaming in the phosphorescent light, sprang through the opening!

THE first thirty seconds of the attack on the sub-men was sheer delirium. Above the roar of the old pistols came howls of rage, of pain, and a momentary panic sent the phosphorescent beings back in confusion. Powder smoke mingled with the clouds of dust, the stench of unclean bodies tainted the air.

"Fay!" Steve seized the stunned girl, half-carried her to a corridor leading from the cave. "Keep 'em busy, Barger!"

The old quartermaster was firing steadily into the packed mass of bowling brutes. By the time he and Haller had reached the corridor, however, both automatics were empty. Barger hurled his empty weapon at a hulking, ungainly figure, leaped for the passage.

"Got to run for it!" he choked. "They won't use their atomite guns! They want Fay alive! Come on!"

Then they were racing through the shadowy corridors, invisible in the darkness. Their pursuers, however, shining shapes in the gloom, were easily seen.

"If only we had a gun!" Barger groaned. "What targets they make!"

Carrying Fay, Haller hadn't the breath to reply. Onward they stumbled, through a maze of corridors, with no notion of direction. The green forms were gaining rapidly, their feet thudding on the stone floor.

Onward the fugitives plunged, through great caves, winding passages. Once they swept through a grotto in which a dozen of the ugly sub-women were gathered, but before the shrill-voiced creatures could attack them, they had reached a rocky gallery beyond. Haller forced himself on, heart pounding. In spite of the dank chill of the caverns he was bathed in sweat; beside him old Barger was wheezing noisily, gasping.

With all their effort, however, the glowing monstrosities were gaining rapidly.

Haller cast a furtive glance over his shoulder, saw a squat figure only a step behind him, And beside the sub-man raced Kindt. Kindt, turned renegade! Carlson and the others didn't surprise him; scum of the space-ports, they were hardly above the inhabitants of the asteroid. But Kindt had seemed different.

The squat green figure, face set in a savage grin, increased his speed. In another moment his clutching hand must seize Steve, drag him down. Suddenly Haller heard the strangled shout:

"Cap'n! Go on! Quick!"

One backward glance Steve had, of Kindt throwing his weight against the foremost pursuer. Down they went in a tangled heap, blocking the narrow passage, and the others fell over them. Then an atomite gun flared blue in the darkness and Kindt's shouts abruptly ceased.

"A right guy," Barger panted. "Plenty right. And I thought he was yellow! We . . . Look! Light!"

Far ahead feeble sunlight gleamed, and the passage slanted upward. The sub-men had resumed the pursuit, but it was evident that they couldn't make up the lost distance before their prey reached the surface of the little world. But even though free of the caverns, the three fugitives could never hope to reach the *Lodestar* without being overtaken. Even if they did reach it, the ship could not break the magnetic grip.

"No . . . no use, Steve!" Fay whispered. "They're bound to get us in the end! Join them, let me go! It's your only chance!"

"Forget it!" he gasped. "Food and water on *Lodestar!* Can stand seige for months once we reach it! Come on!"

The mouth of the passage was only a few feet away, now. Behind them the howling phosphorescent figures were closing in swiftly. All at once Barger, in the lead, gave a cry, pointed through the passage entrance. In the dark sky high above, something huge, glowing, was exploding into a rain of white-hot dots.

"Meteors!" he shouted. "A big one's broken up, and the magnetism is pulling the pieces this way! There'll be hell out there in a moment!"

"Got to risk it!" Steve took one glance at the onrushing sub-men, leaped through the opening. "Come on!"

Hardly a dozen steps had they taken when the storm broke. Easy to understand now, why the pirates of the asteroid had burrowed underground for their dwellings. The meteor storm was a rain of death.

SCREAMING through the thin atmosphere, white-hot from the explosion, the first great stone struck the asteroid. The ground shook as if from an earthquake, a shower of shattered rock rose in a deadly spray. Now another, and another, in a terrifying cosmic borbardment. Fiery missiles, hurtling from the heavens, tearing great gaps in the rough terrain.

Staggering over the heaving, shifting bed of stone, Haller felt as though he were in an inferno. The heat was overpowering, on all sides the ground was churned like a twentieth-century battlefield. Blinding light, the shriek of descending meteors, the earth-shaking roar and rumble as they struck. Barger glanced back; the sub-men were huddled in the entrance of their caverns, shouting with rage, yet not daring to go out.

"Free of them for the time being!" Barger shouted to make himself heard above the roar. "But if one of these chunks of rock hits us . . ."

Haller, supporting the girl, nodded grimly, plodded on. The rain of meteors was at its height now, and the entire plain seemed to be exploding. A great liner, lying ahead, disappeared in a shower of débris as a great stone struck it; another, beside it, was completely buried under the rubble and wreckage. A scene of sheer horror, the plain, shrouded in dust, lit by incessant flashes of light, the loose stones of its surface sliding and rumbling with each new shock. As the three fugitives reeled onward, one of the missiles landed nearby in a blinding flash, a gust of heat. Hurled to the ground, Haller was half-buried by a hail of splintered stone. Blindly, groggily, he picked himself up, pulled Fay to her feet, and, aided by the bruised and bloody Barger, pushed on.

With startling suddenness the storm of meteors ceased. Two or three belated thuds, and there was only the pall of dust, the wrecked spaceships, the great craters, to mark its path.

"Short and sweet," Barger grunted.

"You don't carry a rabbit's foot, do you, Cap'n? How we ever got through that barrage alive!" He glanced back. Luminous figures were streaming from the caverns. "Here come our boy-friends, hell-bent!"

Haller peered through the swirling dust. The stumpy, battered shape of the *Lodestar* was visible not a hundred yards ahead.

"You see, Fay?" he laughed jubilantly. "She's not much of a ship but her hull's tough enough to hold off atomite guns and we've food enough for months. Maybe by that time we can figure out a way to break the magnetic grip!"

She nodded, the color returning to her cheeks, quickened her pace. Behind them faint shouts of rage were audible, and a few blue bolts of energy tore up the rocks nearby. The distance was too great for accurate shooting; and a moment later the three fugitives had swung into the freighter's airlock.

"So!" Haller wiped a paste of sweat and dust from his forehead. "Barger, see that all ports are secure. Replace that smashed one in the control room with a spare from the stores. We're in for a seige!"

As Barger made fast the heavy glassex ports, Haller and the girl closed the massive lock. Howls of rage from outside announced the presence of their pursuers. A moment later several spots on the steel hull glowed red under atomite blasts.

"Let 'em have their fun," Haller grinned. "There's not enough juice in their guns to melt the steel, and as long as we keep away from the outer walls, we don't get burned! Right now the one thing that interests me is a sandwich and . . ."

"Cap'n!" Old Barger rattled down the companionway steps, his face gray. "Big guns! Look!"

Steve whirled, glanced through one of the ports. From a wrecked space-cruiser about half a mile away the sub-men were laboriously dragging a gleaming mass of copper and glass tubes. A heavy heat-gun, designed to destroy armored warships. The little *Lodestar* could have no chance of withstanding its blast. Bestial ape-like figures were setting it up to cover the vessel's bow, while another group were dragging a second heavy projector around to play upon the stern.

"Sixteen-power projectors!" Fay whispered. "Oh, Steve. isn't there anything we can do? To have come through so much . . . and now . . ."

HALLER was silent, and his face took on the old living robot look. No escape! If only the dragging magnetism didn't hold them down! It would have been so simple to open the rockets, leap skyward. But the invisible field held them like a vise, as it had held so many helpless vessels on this Island of Lost Spaceships, never to leave!

A roar from the sub-men sounded outside. Beams of dazzling blue light had burst from the two projectors, had caught the ship in their focus, until it was like a bit of steel in the middle of a spark-gap. Heat . . . searing, unbearable heat, swept the cabin.

"They're turning on the juice slowly," Barger muttered through clenched teeth. "Full power would blast the ship to atoms, but they're trying to force us to surrender! They don't want to destroy the food we got aboard!"

Haller nodded grimly. The heat within the cabin was becoming unbearable now, and the walls were beginning to turn a dull red. He shot a glance at Fay; paper-white, face drawn, the girl was gasping for breath. The veins in old Barger's neck were beginning to stand out apoplectically.

"Lie down!" Haller whispered. "Cooler . . . on floor!"

"What's use!" the quartermaster gasped.

Moment by moment the heat increased. The dull red of the hull was beginning to creep along the floorplates, until they were searing to the touch. Outside the howling of the sub-men was vulpine, frenzied, in mad triumph. Barger groaned, writhing in agony.

"Can't stand it!" he choked. "Being roasted alive!"

Fay turned tortured eyes toward Haller, touched his hand.

"Good fight, Steve!" she whispered. "Shame it has to end like this! Pray that . . . fuel tanks blow up, end it quickly! I . . . I . . ." She fell back, unconscious.

"Fuel tanks . . ." Haller repeated dully. There was something in his mind but he couldn't think. So hot. Hell—living hell. That something in his mind! Heat . . . magnetism . . . no escape.

"Magnetism . . . heat . . ." Drunkenly Haller lurched to his feet. "Barger! Barger!" He dragged the groaning spaceman erect. "Heat destroys magnetism! You see? The bulk of the ship's interior bulkheads are aluminum alloy for lightness! It was the steel hull that dragged us down! And now it's hot . . . red hot! No magnetism! Get down to those motors!"

Half-conscious Barger stumbled down to the engine-room. Haller reeled toward the controls. Everything was spinning before his gaze, the red glare from the searing hull plates dazzled him. Heat! Unbelievable heat . . . killing heat! An ant in an oven! Hair singed, hands blistered, he tugged at the rocket switch. Every movement was torture, the hot air tore at his lungs. Frantically he jerked the switch. Why didn't they start?

1

The sudden roar of the rockets was like a roar of triumph. But though the red-hot hull of the *Lodestar* was now non-magnetic, the engines were still in the grip of the field. The ship ground forward, but did not rise. Desperately Haller opened the jets wide, and slowly the vessel began to climb, gathering speed with each second. Suddenly, as though breaking invisible bonds that had held her, the little ship, glowing like a furnace, leaped toward open space. With a weary sigh Haller slumped over the controls, out, but anything but cold.

They were heading in the general direction of Vega when Barger staggered into the control room, swung the *Lodestar* back toward Mars. Fay bent over Haller, pressed a damp cloth to his face.

"O . . . okay!" he muttered. "Are we clear?"

"Away clean as a whistle," the quartermaster grinned, caressing blistered hands. "And here's hoping I never see the Isle o' Lost Spaceships again!"

Haller lurched to his feet, one arm about the girl's shoulders.

"Aren't you coming along, then?" he laughed. "I haven't forgotten that crack you made about an aluminum, non-magnetic spaceship, and as soon as we reach Mars I'm going to organize a company, have one built! We'll take a well-armed expedition and have a go at that treasure the sub-men had in their caves. After all, a man needs money when" . . . he glanced at the girl beside him . . . "when he's going to get married! I'll need you on an expedition like that, Barger. Think of the fortune in that cave! Millions and millions! How about it?"

The old quartermaster shifted his quid to the other cheek, grinned.

"You could talk the devil into installing air-conditioning," he chuckled. "I'll go!"

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GENESIS!

By R. R. WINTERBOTHAM

Renzu was mad, certainly! From Venus' lifeless clay he dreamed of moulding a mighty race; a new Creation, with himself as God!

THE unreal silence of outer space closed in about *The Traveler*. In front of the huge atom-powered space rocket hung the sun's dazzling disc and behind the pale, silver face of the earth echoed the light. Captain Vic Arlen was a god in the heavens; Dave McFerson, the engineer, was a demi-god. And what was

Harry Renzu? It was hard to call a great scientist a devil.

There was Gheal—neither god nor devil, only a poor, hideous, half-human slave that had been brought with Renzu to the earth from a previous expedition to Venus. Captain Arlen quit trying to classify himself and his passengers. They were neither gods nor devils. Not even men, taking the group as a whole.

An ominous chill seemed to reach through the beryllium hull of the ship from outer space, caressing Arlen's backbone. A faint cry sounded in the passageway that led to the sleeping quarters behind the control room.

The captain tripped the controls into neutral. The acceleration was complete and from now until the braking rockets were fired, the craft would follow its carefully calculated orbit.

Again came the cry, a groan of pain and a moaning sob. The captain strode into the passage.

"Gheal!" he called, recognizing the Venusian's hoarse voice. "Gheal! What's the matter?"

A repetition of the cry was the only answer. The passageway was open, but the sobs seemed to be coming from the cabin of Harry Renzu, the scientist who had chartered the moon rocket for his second expedition to Venus.

The captain paused before the cabin door, listening. The cry came again and he pushed open the door.

The hideous Venusian was on the floor, looking upward with his two light-sensitive eye-glands at Renzu, who stood over him with an upraised cane.

Gheal's rubbery, lipless mouth was agape, revealing his long, sharp teeth. He had raised one of his long, rope-muscled arms to catch the descending blow. His hairless, leathery body trembled slightly with pain.

"You dumb, dim-witted chunk of Venusian protoplasm!" Renzu snarled as he brought the cane crashing over the monster's shoulders. "When I want a thing done, I want it done!"

Arlen pushed into the room and seized Renzu's arm before the scientist could strike again.

"Hold on, Renzu!" Arlen commanded, pushing the scientist back and seizing the cane. "Lay off! Can't you treat this miserable wretch with decency."

Renzu's face flushed angrily. His deep-set eyes burned with fury.

"This is none of your affair!" Renzu snapped. "Go back to your business of running this ship. I didn't hire you to run my business."

"This may be your expedition," Arlen replied stubbornly, "but while we're in space, I'm the captain of this ship and my orders are to be obeyed. My orders are to give this Venusian beast humane treatment."

A whimpering sob broke from the throat of the brute on the floor.

Renzu sullenly twisted his arm loose from the captain's grasp. He appeared more calm now.

"You are right, Arlen," he said. "Your orders are to be obeyed. But you aren't a scientist. You don't know Gheal. He's not like the animals we know on the earth. He has to be beaten."

"Not while we're in space. I won't stand for it."

"You can't stand in the way of science, Arlen. I shall whip Gheal, if I deem it necessary." Renzu ended his words with a suggestive snap of his fingers in Gheal's direction. The monster cringed into a corner of the stateroom.

"Come with me, Gheal," Arlen ordered, beckoning to the monster.

The creature, seeming to understand, rose to his feet and followed Arlen out of the door.

THE captain took the Venusian forward into the control room, where he daubed the welts on the creature's naked shoulders with arnica.

McFerson, easy-going, but dependable old spaceman, watched the operation critically. Gheal winced as the arnica touched his skin. He squirmed and tried to resist.

"Hold on a minute Cap," McFerson said. "Look at the right shoulder, where you put the arnica; it's red and inflamed."

"So it is, but arnica ought to help."

"Look at the left shoulder, where you haven't put any arnica."

"Great guns! It's almost healed!"

"I'd say maybe arnica wasn't the best treatment."

Captain Arlen corked the bottle and put

it aside. "Gheal looks like a man. Sometimes he acts like a man. Yet he's entirely different most of the time.

"I've been watching him, Cap. I somehow get the idea that Gheal finds it unhandy, most of the time, to be built like a man."

The captain laughed. He took Gheal's arm and held it up. "Look at that. Good, human bones, but the body of a monster. I wish you could talk, Gheal. I wish you could tell us more about yourself. Why are you almost a man yet the farthest point south?"

Gheal uttered a sort of deep-throated growl.

"Renzu says you can be vicious—that you're a killer at heart. Renzu said one of your kind killed Jimmy Brooks on the first expedition. You don't look like a killer. Brooks was a big man. You'd have a hard time killing him."

Gheal's sight-glands stared from Arlen to McFerson.

Arlen laughed and patted Gheal's hairless head and pointed to a built-in seat in the corner.

"You're welcome to stay here as long as you don't bother us," he said.

Gheal shuffled uneasily and whimpered, but he did not go to the seat. Instead, he turned and moved toward the door. The creature looked ridiculous, clad as he was only in a pair of Renzu's discarded trousers, which had been rolled at the bottom to fit his stubby legs.

At the door the Venusian hesitated and glanced back at the captain. Then he slowly turned and shuffled down the passageway.

"Hey you!" Captain Arlen shouted. "Come back here!"

Gheal did not stop. He was striding to Renzu's room. He pushed open the door.

A fear for Renzu's safety rushed into the captain's mind. He ran after the creature and entered Renzu's cabin. But as he opened the door he gasped in astonishment.

Gheal was crawling into a corner of the room, while Renzu stood nearby laughing.

"You see, Arlen" smiled Renzu, "I'm his master. He recognizes my authority and no one else's. He would not desert me, no matter how I treated him."

Renzu picked up the cane that Arlen had tossed on the bunk a few minutes before. As the scientist shook the stick at Gheal, Arlen thought he saw a look of satisfaction creep into the creature's face.

"Just the same," Arlen said, "I can't stand your beating him. He may enjoy it. He may be a masochist at heart, but I won't stand for it."

"Your mind is provincially human, Arlen," said Renzu. "When you look at Renzu you see the product of an entirely different evolution. You see a creature without emotions, without ethics. He's devoid of every terrestrial feeling, especially gratitude. He may even hate you for taking his side against me."

There was a trace of bitterness in Renzu's voice.

"I wouldn't be too sure, Renzu," Arlen said. "If the laws of physics apply on Venus, as well as the earth, why couldn't biological and psychological laws apply there also. Even the lowest of creatures show understandable reactions on earth. Why not on Venus?"

"Because Gheal has been made differently," Renzu said, with a repulsive grin.

HOUR by hour Captain Arlen watched Venus grow in size. The planet expanded from a glowing crescent to the size of the moon as seen from the earth; soon it floated large in space, filling half the sky ahead of the ship, a billowing, fluffy ball of shining clouds. Its surface was entirely obscured by its misty atmosphere.

Arlen began braking the ship and he called Renzu into the control room for a conference on where to pierce the cloud blanket.

Renzu, huge and muscular, overdid himself in graciousness as he greeted Arlen in the control room. The scientist seemed to radiate exaltation and he strained himself to appear congenial.

The man was excited, Arlen decided, for Arlen himself was thrilled at the prospect of adventure, of seeing strange sights on a strange planet. But the reaction was different in Arlen. Where Renzu swelled and swaggered, Arlen looked dreamily into the clouds ahead.

"I'm bringing the ship around to the sunward side," Arlen said. "It's best to land about noon—that is the noon point. The planet turns once in thirty hours and that will give us a little more than seven hours of daylight to orient ourselves after the landing."

Renzu nodded in agreement. All this had been threshed out before.

"Very well," he said, "but it is best that you pierce the clouds at about forty-five degrees north latitude. There's ocean there that nearly circles the planet and there's fewer chances of running into mountains beneath the clouds. Once we're through the cloud belt, we'll have no difficulty. The clouds are three or four miles above the surface and there's plenty of room to maneuver beneath them."

Arlen twisted the valves and the deceleration became uncomfortably violent. Renzu's first trip had determined the existence of a breathable atmosphere on the surface of Venus, although the cloud belt was filled with gases given off by Venusian volcanoes, and many of these gases were poisonous to man.

In a few minutes the rocket ship stood off just above the cloud belt. McFerson checked the landing mechanism and made his final report to the captain. Arlen checked the gravity gauge, which now would be used as an altimeter during the blind flying in the Venusian clouds.

"Okay!" Captain Arlen called.

"Okay!" echoed McFerson.

The Traveler nosed downward into the rolling clouds. A whistling whine arose as the craft struck the atoms of the atmosphere. Repulsion jets set up their thunder and the landing operation began.

The ship settled slowly through the clouds. The mist completely obscured everything outside the craft and Arlen flew blind, trusting his meteor detection devices to warn him of mountain peaks, which he feared despite Renzu's assurance that there were no high ranges at this latitude.

At last the craft dropped through the wispy canopy to float serenely over a calm ocean which bulged upward toward them in the solar flood tide.

To the northwest was a dim coastline. High mountains were faintly visible against the horizon.

"Perfect!" said Renzu. "That is my continent—our destination. Sail toward it."

The ship zoomed toward the land at the comparatively slow speed of five hundred miles an hour. In a few minutes it was decelerating again, with the continent before them.

The high mountain range clambered up from a narrow plain that skirted the sea. This plain was sandy, a desert waste, but Renzu indicated it was the spot for the landing.

Arlen brought *The Traveler* down gently alongside a broad stream that emptied into the sea. When the dust of the landing cleared away, he looked with dumbfounded amazement at the Venusian scene.

As far as his eyes could see were barren rocks and sand: there were no trees, no grass, no signs of life. The planet was as sterile as an antiseptic solution. Even seaweed and mosses were missing from the seashore.

"Maybe you know what you're doing, Renzu," Arlen said, "but it looks to me as if you've directed us to the edge of a desert."

" 'Tain't no small desert, either," chimed McFerson.

"My dear Arlen," Renzu replied, cracking his lips in another of his irritating smiles, "this is one of the most fertile spots on the entire planet. You must remember, Venus is much different from the earth."

IMMEDIATELY after the landing all hands, including Renzu, were busy with the routine duties that the expedition required. Gheal was given simple tasks, such as unpacking boxes of equipment to be used by the expedition, but the Venusian seemed to attend to these in a preoccupied manner. He worked in sort of a daze, frequently whimpering like a sick dog, and turning his globular eyes from time to time out of the porthole at the landscape of his native planet.

"He's homesick," McFerson suggested to Arlen. "But look! What's he got in his hand?"

It was a long white bar of metal. Arlen quickly seized the bar and examined it. It was pure silver. Gheal had been un-

packing a box crammed with silver bars of assorted lengths and thicknesses, ranging from the size of small wire up to rods half an inch thick and a foot or more in length. A fortune in silver had been transported to Venus.

"Well, that's Renzu's business, not mine," Arlen decided.

He returned to his duties. There was much to do: the engines had to be recharged, preparatory to a quick takeoff, should conditions arise to make the planet untenable for earthmen.

Tests of the soil revealed utter sterility of all forms of life. It was baffling. Some sort of bacteria should have been in the soil, even though the place was only a desert.

Arlen opened the arms chest and issued small but powerful atomic disintegrators to McFerson, Renzu and himself. He did not give Gheal one of the weapons, for Gheal did not appear to have the skill necessary to operate it. His uncanny ignorance was so obvious.

The disintegrators were simple magnetic mechanisms capable of collapsing atoms of atmosphere and sending the resultant force of energy in a directed stream toward a target. Fire from disintegrators could melt large rocks almost instantly and it could destroy any living creature known to man.

Renzu strapped his weapon at his side and turned to Arlen.

"I'm going outside for a walk with Gheal," he said. "Gheal seems nervous and uneasy. Perhaps his actions are due to his return to his native land. A walk might make him happier, in his own peculiar way."

Arlen nodded and went back to the control room to talk to McFerson. He found the engineer looking out of a porthole.

"Look!" McFerson said, pointing out the porthole.

Trudging along the beach, carrying the case containing the silver rods, were Renzu and Gheal. The Venusian was walking with difficulty, but as he faltered, Renzus would kick him unmercifully and force him on.

"The devil!" Captain Arlen said. "He doesn't dare beat Gheal when he knows I'm watching."

McFerson shook his head.

"Maybe he's right, treating Gheal that way," he said. "After all, Renzu is a scientist and he knows more about Gheal than we do. Maybe he's right in saying beating is the only treatment Gheal understands. Besides, I don't know if I trust Gheal. Since we've landed he's acted like a tiger in a cage. Gheal's a Venusian and Venusians are supposed to have murdered Renzu's partner on the first expedition."

"But even the worst creature on earth—except man, perhaps—doesn't kill without a reason. And even man sometimes has a reason, when apparently he hasn't."

Darkness descended rapidly on Venus and Renzu did not return. The two spacemen decided it was unnecessary to stand guard and turned in. Renzu knew how to operate the space locks from the outside of the ship and could enter when he returned. Gheal, whose clumsy fingers were too unweildly even to operate a disintegrator gun, would not be able to operate the locks, nor would any creature like him.

It was still dark when Arlen awakened. The long, fifteen-hour Venusian night was completed and still Renzu had not returned.

The captain awakened McFerson. They ate a light breakfast and did minor chores on the ship until daylight suddenly lighted the landscape.

"Do you suppose we ought to look for them? Maybe Gheal went haywire. Maybe something's happened."

Arlen considered. Renzu was armed, while Gheal was not. Renzu claimed complete mastery over the Venusian, yet something might have happened to give Gheal the upper hand. Not that Renzu didn't deserve it.

"I'l go outside and look around," Arlen said.

Arlen stepped through the locks. The warm Venusian air was invigorating. He took a deep breath.

A shuffling sound behind him caused the captain to turn. There, rounding the end of the ship was a creature, fully naked, staring at him with gland-like eyes and baring his teeth in a vicious snarl.

"Gheal!" Arlen cried. "Gheal! Where's Renzu?"

The creature did not reply. Instead, it advanced slowly with a shuffling crouch, stretching his arms menacingly toward Arlen.

ARLEN'S hand went to his disintegrator. The creature resembled Gheal, but it did not act like Gheal. The captain's eyes swept over the animal again. No, it wasn't Gheal. There were differences. It was another of Gheal's race.

Arlen hesitated to kill the creature. If there were a tribe of the creatures in the vicinity, such an act would arouse enmity. It would lead to complications that would endanger Renzu, who was away from the ship. Yet, Arlen could not be sure what reaction would follow a slaying. Renzu had said that Venusians had no emotions, in the sense that man has them. But Gheal certainly had been nostalgic on the day before. That at least was understandable in a human sense.

Arlen leveled his pistol. Suddenly another figure appeared.

A low-voiced whine sounded as the second figure darted forward.

It was the real Gheal. He was still wearing Renzu's trousers.

The first Venusian turned. He hesitated stupidly, undecided whether to continue his charge toward Arlen, or to meet the foe who came from behind. Finally, the beast apparently decided that Arlen was the most tempting.

The animal sprang at the captain.

Arlen held his gun ready to fire, but the Venusian had acted with a swiftness that belied his clumsy appearance. Before Arlen could fire, a heavy, rubbery arm crashed down on his skull. A meteor shower seemed to flash through Arlen's brain, and then darkness closed in about him as he tumbled to the sandy beach.

Arlen opened his eyes. He had no way of telling how long he had lain on the ground. On Venus one never sees the sun; daylight appears and daylight fades, but there is no way of telling the time of day from the position of the sun overhead.

The captain's head ached as he lifted himself from the ground. He shook his head to clear away the haze and he stretched his arms to rise. His fingers struck something leathery and cold.

There at his side lay the Venusian monster who had attacked him. A wave of nausea swept over him as he saw the lifeless body horribly mutilated and torn. The sandy soil of the beach was torn with the struggle that had taken place.

Arlen forgot his aching head as he examined the dead Venusian. His disintegrator had not slain the Venusian; clearly Gheal had done the job.

"So Gheal came to my rescue!" Arlen exclaimed. "Renzu must have been wrong. These Venusians do have gratitude."

His eyes saw something else as they traveled over the body.

Protruding from the body was a silver rod. Gingerly Arlen tried to pull the rod from the animal's body, but it would not budge. Was it a weapon?

Arlen saw other rods sticking from the animal, covered with blood. All of them seemed firmly set in the body of the Venusian.

Arlen looked behind him. The locks of the space ship were open. He moved wearily to the door and stuck his head inside.

"McFerson!" he called.

There was no answer.

Arlen entered the ship. He carried his disintegrator in his hand. Venusians might have entered the ship ahead of him. Lights were still burning in the living quarters, but McFerson was gone.

Arlen moved on; he searched each cabin, but there was no sign of McFerson, until he reached the control room. There furniture had been overturned, instruments smashed, and a pool of blood lay on the floor.

Gheal had done this. Arlen was sure that no other Venusian could have entered the ship and crept up on McFerson without arousing suspicion. McFerson's disintegrator lay on the floor beside the pool of blood, indicating that McFerson had grown suspicious too late. The gun had not been discharged.

The first thing Arlen had to do was to protect himself from further attack. He drew his own gun and closed the outer locks. The next thing would be to decide what had happened and what to do.

Renzu probably had suffered the same fate as McFerson, Arlen decided. He was alone, in a strange world, face to face with a race of mankilling monsters. The only thing in his favor was that one of these monsters had befriended him. But how long and how far could Arlen trust this friendship?

There was, however, a chance that Mc-

Ferson or Renzu still might be living. He had to know for sure about this before he did anything else. And the only way to learn was to investigate.

He left the ship, carefully closing the locks and fastening them behind him. He found many tracks leading away from the ship, along the banks of the stream that flowed from the mountains.

From among the tracks he picked out Renzu's bootprints. There were tracks of Gheal going away, coming back, and going away again. He distinguished the two sets of Gheal's prints leading toward the mountains by the fact that one set was more deeply imprinted in the moist sand than the other. Gheal had been carrying McFerson's body.

But what was this? There was another set of tracks coming toward the space ship. They were not Gheal's prints, for they were three toed. Gheal had five toes. Gheal and the creature who had attacked Arlen were different—one had three, the other five toes.

Gheal might not have rescued Arlen out of gratitude after all. A natural enmity might have existed between the two races of Venusians. Arlen's rescue might have been an accident.

Arlen studied. There was something else that fitted into the picture. If he could fit it correctly, he would have the answer. Somehow, now, he doubted if Gheal had rescued him out of gratitude; yet, he doubted if the rescue had been purely accidental.

Arlen returned to the space ship and loaded a haversack with food. He was going into the mountains to get to the bottom of the mystery. He scribbled a note and left it in the control cabin in case Renzu or McFerson returned; if either were alive.

THE captain followed the stream into a deep-walled canyon opening into the mountains. A short distance from the ship he found Gheal's discarded trousers, indicating beyond a doubt that the Venusian had come this way after Arlen had been knocked unconscious in the sand.

A mile or so farther on he saw a print where Gheal had placed McFerson on the ground. Then, a thrill of gratitude swept over Arlen, another set of boot prints appeared on the trail. McFerson was not dead. He was walking.

The daylight was fading and Arlen realized he would not have much more time to follow the tracks without the aid of his flashlight. The walls of the gorge were almost perpendicular now and nearly a mile high on each side of the stream. The river boiled and churned over the barren rocks, but its movement was the only animation of the scene. Nowhere were there signs of life, excepting the footprints on the trail.

At last the trail forked upward from the stream, following a narrow ledge of rock along the canyon wall. The footprints of the slain Venusian now were wide apart and deeply imprinted in the sand, indicating that the creature had run rapidly down the path.

"He probably spotted our ship landing and headed toward us right away," muttered Arlen. "His presence outside the craft may have been what made Gheal so uneasy yesterday. Gheal sensed an enemy near at hand." But this didn't seem to be the answer, either.

Beyond the next curve the canyon walls slid back and the ledge widened into a gentle slope leading to the top of the canyon. As Arlen climbed over the rim he found himself on a plateau.

It was dark now, but the place was lighted by a huge campfire not far away. Huddled around the campfire were four figures. In the still air of the night, Arlen heard guttural grunts of Venusians and above these tones he heard the sharp voice of Harry Renzu issuing commands to these alien beasts.

Arlen crept forward and concealed himself behind a rock. There were three Venusians. He saw something else, too. McFerson, his head swathed in bandages, was sitting in the shadow of a huge square stone.

Arlen watched. He could not hear Renzu's words and he moved forward to obtain a better view, when his hand sank into a sticky mass of slime.

"Ugh!" he grunted in disgust, lifting his hand.

It was covered with a thick, viscous jelly. It was sticky and as he turned his flashlight on the stuff he saw that it was colorless and translucent. It was not a

plant or an animal. It did not move, it was cold, and had no structure, nor roots.

Shielding his light so that it could not be seen from the campfire, Arlen examined the ground around him. There were other small pools of the stuff in the hollows of rocks and in thick masses on the ground.

The captain examined the material more closely. It looked strangely familiar, and some of the text-book science he had learned in college came back to him. He remembered examining stuff like this once under a microscope. It was not petroleum, but something vastly different—something that was synonymous with life.

It was protoplasm!

VIC ARLEN gasped.

"Protoplasm! Inanimate protoplasm!"

He forgot he had been nauseated by the slime a moment before and began to examine the stuff closely. Of course, it was protoplasm, it couldn't be anything else. Vic Arlen had studied it. He knew. Nothing could hold water granules in suspension in exactly the same way; nothing had the same baffling construction.

But there was a question: scientists admitted life could not exist without protoplasm, but could protoplasm exist without life?

In living protoplasm, death alters the structure. But other processes than life could, conceivably, preserve the stability of the substance. This would explain the existence of inanimate protoplasm on Venus.

And why didn't inanimate protoplasm exist on the earth? Arlen thought for a moment and had the answer for that too. Animal life lives on protoplasm, as well as being protoplasm itself. Animate protoplasm can reproduce its kind, but the inanimate kind can neither fight back nor replace its losses. The inanimate protoplasm on the earth had disappeared with the appearance of the first animal life. The coming of the first microbes had caused it to "decay."

If protoplasm existed on the face of Venus it meant there were no bacteria, no germs of any sort—*no life!*

How could Arlen explain Gheal without evolution from the simple to the complex? Was evolution working differently on Venus? Again Arlen had run up a blind alley.

The campfire cast a flickering red glow against the clouds. In spots above the skies were tinted with other glows from the craters of Venusian volcanoes. It was not absolutely dark, but it was far from being as light as a moonlit night on the earth.

Arlen crept closer to the scene. He could see the Venusians plainly now. Two of them had three toes, while one had five. The five-toed one was Gheal.

Renzu stood before them, grasping his cane. He would make sharp commands and the Venusians would rise. If they disobeyed, he would strike them with the cane. They would shriek with pain. At last these maneuvers ceased and Renzu turned to McFerson.

"They have to be taught everything," he said. "They have no reflex actions, no emotions, no instinct — nothing that the lowest creatures on earth may have. Yet they have everything that makes those things in the creatures of the earth."

McFerson did not reply. He was watching with staring eyes; eyes filled with horror.

Renzu reached behind a rock. He drew what appeared to be a human skeleton from the shadow. As Arlen looked a second time, he saw that it was not a human skeleton, but an imitation built of the silver rods and wires that Renzu had transported to Venus. The truth was dawning on Arlen, but it was unnecessary now, for Renzu was explaining.

"I have created life, McFerson. I have moulded a human likeness out of protoplasm and fitted it over bones of silver. An electrical device I have made starts the biological processes going and the protoplasm, working with chemical exactitude, reforms itself into glands, organs, muscles and nerves. The product is a beast, inferior to man but superior to the highest animal on earth, except that he is totally devoid of such things as reflexes, instincts, emotions and other survival psychological processes."

As he spoke, Renzu was moulding some of the protoplasm over the framework of bones. Arlen understood now why the silver rods had protruded from the Venusian he had found on the beach. Those

pieces of silver had been the creature's bones.

"I made four of the creatures on my previous expedition. Brooks helped me construct three of them, including the creature that attacked and killed Arlen on the beach. I made Gheal myself. Gheal was a masterpiece. He was almost, but not quite human. That is why I took him to earth with me."

"You're inhuman, Renzu!" McFerson managed to say. 'You're less human than Gheal!"

"Gheal was more human than you think, McFerson. Brooks, you know, was killed by one of his creations. The same monster that killed Arlen accounted for him. Yet that monster, in some ways, was above average. At least he had the beginnings of an instinct. He wanted to kill. After Brooks was killed, I used his bones for Gheal's skeleton."

Arlen stared in speechless horror and amazement.

"And that isn't all. I'm going to use Arlen's bones for a creature more human than Gheal. Perhaps, McFerson, your bones may be used for something greater still. I will make other men, and women, from silver wire and protoplasm, and create a race of Venusians that will bring life to this planet. Think of a planet that has evolution beginning with man and ending with something greater than man has ever dreamed. And I, McFerson, will be the god of this race!"

McFerson tried to rise, but Gheal rose with a low throated growl, and the spaceman sank back on the ground.

RENZU had finished moulding the protoplasm over the silver bones. With the help of one of the Venusians he lifted the still form into the air and placed it carefully inside the stone behind McFerson.

The stone had been hollowed to form a rock sarcophagus.

Arlen saw in the firelight that electric wires ran from a small battery beside the box.

Renzu touched the switch.

There was a flash of blinding light and sparks flew over the box. Then Renzu turned off the current and opened the sarcophagus. He worked rapidly with his hands and then stepped back, holding his cane before him.

From the box emerged another Venusian. A replica of Gheal's three-toed companions.

For a moment the creature stood motionless, staring from the sight glands at his surroundings. Renzu struck the monster sharply with his cane. The brute moved. Again Renzu struck and the creature moved. At last it seemed to understand, after Renzu struck it repeatedly. The beast got out of the box.

Renzu belabored his creation unmercifully with the cane, each movement had to be directed.

"They have to be taught everything," Renzu said. "They understand nothing but pain. I have to beat instincts and reflexes into their dumb brains, for they have no inherited ones."

That also explained why Renzu was a complete master over Gheal. The Venusian depended on Renzu for everything.

So interested was Arlen watching Renzu train the newly made Venusian, that the captain did not hear the scrape of a leathery hide on the rocks behind him. He was unaware of the danger until a ropy cord of some vile, repulsive tentacle seized him, pulled him off his feet to the ground and dragged him toward the camp fire.

The rays of the firelight revealed Arlen's captor: a serpent as large as a python which held him in the crushing folds of its body as it moved deliberately toward Renzu.

Renzu was amazed at the sight of Arlen.

"I thought you were dead!" he gasped.

"No," Arlen said. "Your creation didn't quite succeed in killing me."

Renzu smiled. "But I see that you did bring your fine bones to me after all!" He struck the serpent sharply with his cane and the monster released his grip on Arlen. "The animal that caught you, captain, was one of our first experiments. It was by charging a string of protoplasm with electricity, that we discovered that we could make it live. The result was the pseudopython, who makes a good watchdog, if nothing else. It's entirely harmless, since it feeds entirely on inanimate protoplasm. Unfortunately for Brooks, it was this creature that caught him and held him while No. 3—the Venusian—killed him."

"It was deliberate murder," said Arlen.

"Perhaps terrestrial law would define it as murder," Renzu said. "But here on Venus there is no law. It was a scientific experiment."

"And you will murder McFerson and me?"

"I need your skeletons. They will be a fine heritage for future races of Venusians. Think how you and McFerson will be glorified in Venusian mythology."

Renzu's eyes were glowing in the firelight with madness. Arlen looked at the hideous Venusians, seated nearby, watching idiotically. It was diabolical!

"Now comes an important decision. Shall I use you, or McFerson, first?"

McFERSON closed his eyes.

"The man's insane, Cap!"

Arlen looked about him. The python was nearby, coiled neatly beside a rock, ready to spring if he tried to escape.

One of the Venusians rose and threw some shale on the fire. It was crude petroleum shale. An idea came to Arlen. If he could put out the fire, he might be able to escape in the darkness.

Then Arlen remembered. His disintegrator was still in his pocket. Renzu, interested in his experiment, had forgotten to search him, believing perhaps that Arlen had been disarmed in the attack on the beach.

Arlen was tempted to use the weapon now, and to blast Renzu and his hideous tribe of monsters out of existence. But to kill a man without giving him a chance was not Arlen's way of doing things. The Venusians, too, now had a right to live. Had they attacked, Arlen would not have hesitated to kill, but Arlen realized that the only vicious Venusian was dead. Perhaps Renzu himself had taught that single Venusian how to kill.

"McFerson," spoke Arlen, "are you all right? Did Gheal hurt you?"

"He bloodied my nose and knocked me out," McFerson said. "He didn't mean to harm me. Gheal really is gentle as a kitten."

"I think I will use your bones first, Arlen," said Renzu. "You may sit down beside McFerson. I may as well warn you that there is no chance of escape. The python guards the only way back and my Venusians enjoy the creation of another of their kind. They won't let a chance to see it be spoiled."

Renzu began filling some woven baskets with the inanimate protoplasm as Arlen sat down beside his companion.

"Could you run for it, if I knocked out the campfire?" Arlen asked.

"I can run, but how will you knock out the fire?"

Vic Arlen acted quickly. His hand brought the disintegrator out of his pocket and he fired straight into the center of the campfire. The atomic blast instantly consumed the inflammable material in the fire and the plateau was dark.

"Run!" Arlen cried. "And look out for the python."

Arlen sprang forward. He heard a leathery scrape ahead of him. It was the serpent. He dodged back. Suddenly from behind came a hoarse cry.

Arlen turned, ready to blast the Venusian that had shouted. But the Venusian did not attack. Instead, it darted forward, and with a flying leap it sprang upon the python. A roar came from the Venusian's throat.

It was Gheal. Arlen would have recognized the voice anywhere.

The faint glow from the volcanoes showed him the edge of the plateau.

Renzu was screaming behind him and he heard the pad-pad of the running feet of the three remaining Venusians. But Arlen was clear and McFerson was running beside him.

Arlen took his flashlight from his pocket and used it to follow the narrow ledge down the mountain into the canyon. Behind the two men, sounds of pursuit grew fainter.

"We're safe," Arlen said, slackening his pace. "Renzu won't follow us as long as he knows we're armed."

"He's armed, too," McFerson said.

"He wants our bones too badly to use a disintegrator on us," Arlen laughed.

The two men traveled on. The Venusian dawn came swiftly.

"You see, Mac," Arlen went on, "we're not human beings to Renzu, but part of an experiment. Science has overshadowed Renzu's sense of values. Perhaps he murdered Jimmy Brooks; we know he would have murdered us to perfect an experi-

ment. Renzu was creating life, and he would kill to do it. He wanted to be the god of a world that started with a complex organism instead of a simple microbe."

"The only trouble is that the life lacked instincts that it took terrestrial animals millions of years to acquire," McFerson added.

"That's what creation may be, Mac," said Arlen. "We did more in a few minutes than Renzu did with all his scientific knowledge. Gheal learned the meaning of gratitude. I treated him kindly, and he repaid me by helping us escape."

They reached the ship. The sea was boiling over the sands. Here and there, along the water's edge as the dawn broke over Venus, they saw globose formations of inanimate Venusian protoplasm, seemingly awaiting the spark that would turn them into living organisms.

Venus was in an azoic age, but life was beginning to appear. It was life created by a human god, who also was a human devil, a monster. Future generations of Venusians might worship Harry Renzu, unknowing that it was the lowly Gheal that brought the first worthwhile instinct to their race.

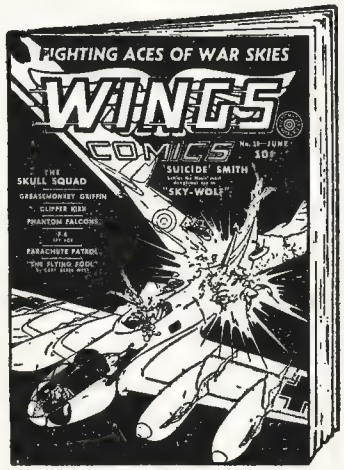
Somewhere, far behind in the canyon, were four hideous monsters and a beast that resembled a serpent. This stampede of protoplasmic creation was led by its mad god, driven onward by the lust of this insane demiurgos for the bones of his fellow deities.

"Okay!" said Arlen, priming the rockets.

"Okay!" shouted McFerson.

The Traveler was ready to rocket home.

A Natural for the Kids and Grownups!



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World of Mockery

By SAM MOSKOWITZ

When John Hall walked on Ganymede, a thousand weird beings walked with him. He was one man on a sphere of mocking, mad creatures—one voice in a world of shrieking echoes.

JOHN HALL wiped away blood that trickled from his mouth. Painstakingly he disengaged himself from the hopeless wreckage of the control room. He staggered free, his lungs pumping with terrific effort to draw enough oxygen from the thin, bitterly cold air of Ganymede —that had rushed in when his helmet had been shocked open.

Feeling unusually light he walked over to an enormous tear in the side of his space-cruiser. A bleak scene met his eyes. Short, grotesquely hewn hills and crags. Rocky pitted plains. And a bitter, wild wind blew constantly, streaming his long hair into disarray.

He cursed through tight lips. Fate! He had been on his way to Vesta, largest city of Jupiter, when his fuel had given out. He had forgotten to check it, and here he was.

Despondently he kicked a small rock in front of him. It rose unhindered by the feeble gravitation fully thirty feet in the air.

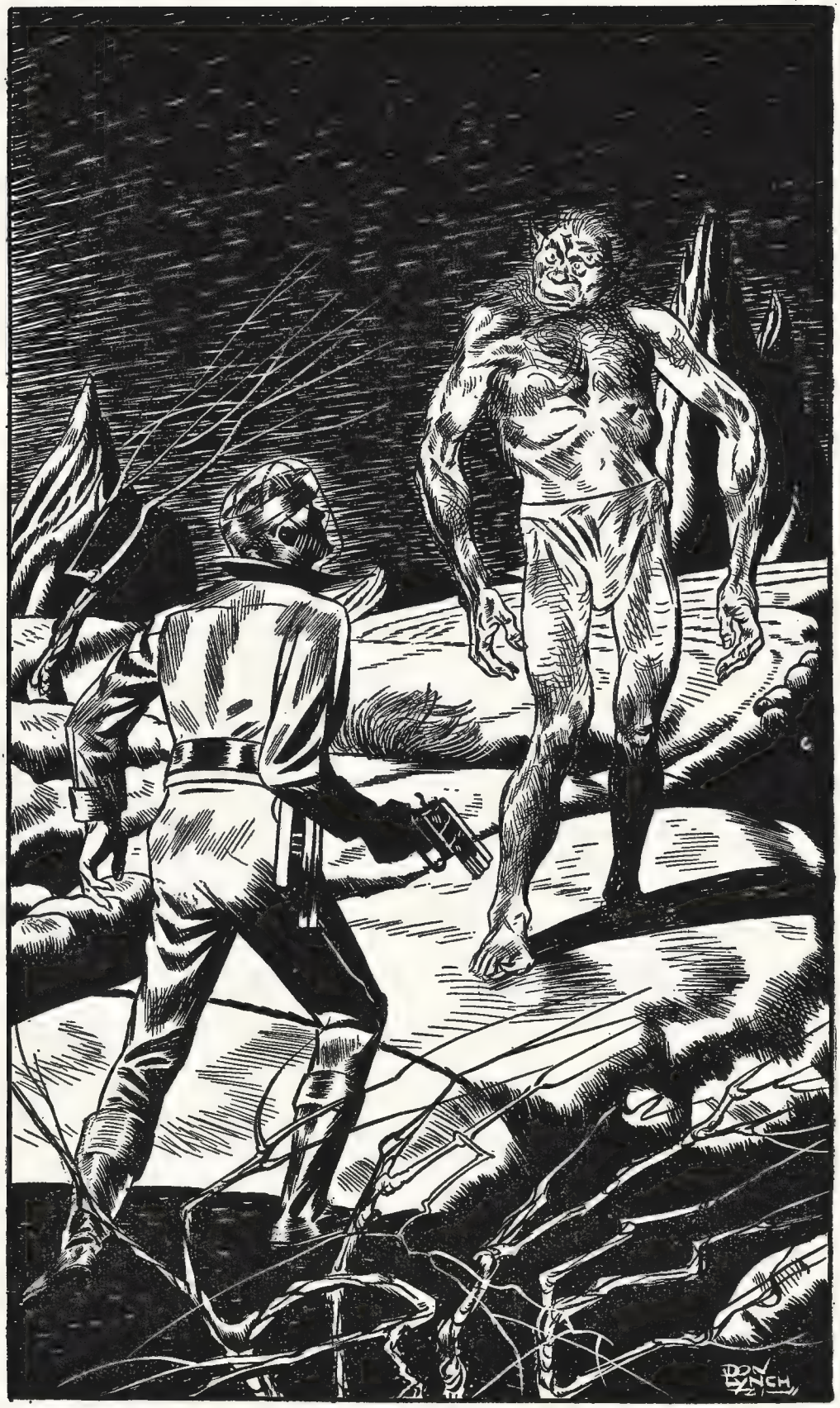
Suddenly there were a dozen scuffing sounds, and a dozen stones winged themselves painstakingly through the air and began to descend in slow motion.

Surprise struck, he gazed furtively about him. Momentarily his heart seemed caught in some terrible vise.

There was a sudden movement behind a close ridge. Momentarily John Hall was rendered paralyzed. Then he backed slowly toward the ship and safety behind a Johnson heat ray. The vague form abruptly materialized, etched in black against the twilight horizon of Ganymede. The effect was startling. The creature stood upright, on two legs, with two gnarled, lengthy arms dangling from its bony shoulders. Human? The question registered itself on his brain, and the thing in front of him gave unwitting reply, as it moved to a clearer position. No, not human. Maybe not even animal. Two great eyes bulged curiously from a drawn, shrunken, monkey-like face. The body was as warped and distorted as the bole of an old oak tree. With pipe-stem arms and legs, bulging at the joints. Its most natural position seemed to be a crouch, with the arms dragging on the ground. Somehow this travesty of human form struck him as being humorous. He chuckled throatily, and then stopped with a start as the same chuckle crudely vibrated back, echo-like. But it was no echo! No, that wasn't possible. John raised his hand to scratch his head through force of habit; forgetful that this was impossible through the thick glassite helmet he wore. The tall, gangling creature in front of him watched closely for a moment, then stretched one preposterously long limb up and scratched briskly on his leathery skull in imitation of John Hall.

The answer struck him instantly. Why hadn't he thought of it. This animal, this thing, whatever it was, was a natural mimic. Such a thing was not unknown on earth. Monkeys often imitated the gestures of humans. Parrots prattled back powerful expletives and phrases. He rather welcomed his new find now. It would be pretty dismal all alone on desolate Ganymede with no one to talk to but himself, and this strange animal would undoubtedly help to lighten the long, dreary hours, perhaps days, that stretched ahead of him until rescue came. Certainly there was nothing to fear from this creature; not at least by himself, born to resist the pull of a gravity force many times more powerful then that of Ganymede's.

HE walked slowly toward the creature viewing its reactions carefully. It held its ground. Evidentally fear was not an element in its makeup. Why should it be? Doubtlessly these things were the


DON LYNCH

only animate life on the globe. Masters of all they surveyed. No other beings to contest their supremecy. No need then for fear or even for savageness. They were, undoubtedly, happy-go-lucky beasts who scavenged the bleak, rocky surface of the moon for hardy mosses or whatever they lived on. He heard a scuffing noise to his left. Another creature, similar almost in every detail to the first had popped into view. That seemed to be a signal for a dozen others to haphazardly appear from the most unexpected places and niches. One rose up within a few feet of Hall and blinked its great eyes at him in greeting.

"What the—", Hall spluttered to himself, "seems to be a family reunion of some sort." Suddenly, prompted by some impish quirk he shouted to his bizarre audience, "Hello there." A moment of silence and then a chorus of rasping sounds sent back "Ah-low-da." Probably the closest that their crude vocal apparatus could interpret his alien accents. Continuing his mock procedure, John stretched his hands aloft, and then in stiff, prim fashion bowed low. With solemn dignity the assembly emulated his action. John leaped twenty feet into the air with glee, and as he floated slowly to the ground he watched the pitiful attempts below to equal his feat.

For a moment everything was still and John good-naturedly surveyed the grotesque caricatures of human beings that surrounded him. "Well," John finally commented candidly, "at least we are in agreement over what line of action to follow, which is more than I could say for a lot of human friends of mine." A blurred attempt at imitation followed.

Then abruptly it was dark. Just like that. Perhaps you have seen darkness fall in the tropics? Just ten or fifteen minutes of twilight and then it's dark. The thin atmosphere of Ganymede did not maintain twilight very long. John cursed a little as he backed his erratic way back to the ship, revealed only by the gleam of the stars on its rounded hull. He groped about for the tear in the surface of the glimmering shell, found it and tumbled hastily in to escape the terrible cold that was forming in the absence of the sun's heat. The pilot room was rapidly assuming the aspect of an underground cavern with long, gleaming icicles hanging from the top. John grumbled a bit, and then opened the door to the small supply room. Closed it quickly behind him and sat down on a box of canned beans. Funny, he reflected, that they had never been able to produce synthetic foods in feasible form. Perhaps habit was harder to change than the scientists had thought. People still liked their meals—solid. He reach out and switched on the feeble storeroom light which operated from an independent source. Its yellow glow brought back a comforting nostalgia. He dined frugally on a can of beans and some biscuits; turned the heating units of his suit up to 70 degrees, and dozed into fitful slumber.

SOME indeterminate period later he awoke. His mind still a little numbed by sleep he slipped the catch on his helmet and threw it back in order to take advantage of the bracing effect the sharp, thin air of Ganymede had displayed on the previous evening. He was totally unprepared for the furnace-like blast of heat that swept across his exposed features. He stood for a moment, stupefied, while the oven-heat dried the juices of his face and started to take on a blistering effect. Comprehension dawned magically and he snapped back the helmet and breathed with distinct relief the air supplied by his space suit which was scientifically kept at a pleasant temperature. The explanation was simplicity itself. The air cover of Ganymede was so thin, and its cloudless skies so clear, that the sun, though distant, beat down like old fury itself. He opened the door that led from the supply room into the pilot room. The long, pointed icicles which had formed the previous night were gone. The only clue to show that they had once existed was a rapidly rising cloud of steam from the steel floor. His glassite helmet misted swiftly as he walked through the room, then cleared slowly as he stepped out into the full glare of the sun. He could not help but admire the potency of this yellow star, even from a distance at which it appeared hardly larger than a standard sized base ball.

He cupped one heavily encased hand over the top of his helmet to protect his eyes from the sun, and searched the skies thoroughly for any sign of a rescue ship. Sighting nothing he dropped his hand

despondently to his side and stumbled thoughtfully along the rough terrain. His mind worked desperately, attempting to devise some feasible means of signaling the rescue parties which must, at this very moment, be combing the space lanes—searching for him. Some huge flare might be useful, but a simple glance about him revealed that the largest form of plant life, which might serve as fuel, were small grey mosses that grew on the underside of occasional outcropping rock formations. They were useless for anything but a tiny smudge fire. His mind turned back to his ship. Possibly there was something highly combustible aboard that might be used for a flare. His mind flitted thoughtfully over every item in the ship's supplies and retired with the conclusion that the anti-fire campaigns which had been conducted for so long on the inhabited planets were going too far! His only hope lay in the possibility that one of the rescue ships might briefly scan the surface of Ganymede with one of their telescopic vision plates and notice the gleaming wreck of his auxiliary space ship. That gave him an idea. Something he had once used in an old book. About a castaway on a desert island arranging rocks to spell out giant words in the hope that some passing airplane might see the message and land to investigate. Slim chance, but still nothing could be overlooked if he hoped for eventual rescue.

Swiftly he set about gathering rocks. He planned to form the simple four letter word HELP, with an exclamation point added for emphasis. So engrossed was he in his work that he scarcely noted the unusual volume of noise about him, or if he did notice it attributed it to the small slides caused by his unearthing rocks from their natural formation. Hours passed while he painstakingly formed the shape of an enormous letter "H," a letter fully a tenth of a mile long. Exhausted by the unaccustomed manual labor he straightened up a moment and cast an approving eye across the extent of his handiwork. A gasp rose involuntarily from his throat as a strange sight crossed his line of vision. The land about him fairly swarmed with the peculiar, bony creatures he had encountered the evening before, and as far as his eyes could see there stretched an uninterrupted series of H's, all exactly similar in shape, size and peculiarities of the original! And at the edge of each of the letters sat a puffing group of emaciated, leathery skinned Ganymedians! Their great, watery eyes blinking patiently and soulfully in his direction!

He didn't know whether to laugh or to cry. It was impossible to proceed. In order to lay out another letter he would have to accomplish the tremendous task of removing all the other H's as well. He shuddered as he realized that he would have to repeat the process again and again until finally the one word help, with a string of exclamation points miles in length remained. Suddenly a thought struck him. Wasn't this seemingly endless row of huge H's sufficient to attract the attention of any searching party that happened to see it without going to the trouble, double trouble at that, of adding the rest of the letters that spelled out the word HELP? It seemed logical enough to him. With a distinct air of relief he turned away, his arduous task of the past few hours completed, thanks to these freakish creatures that inhabited this moon.

AGAIN the beginning of the short twilight was progressing and the sun was settling rapidly in the sky—its glare and heat diminishing with each passing moment. The massive bulk of Jupiter above could be seen only as a long, thin, crescent that stretched one quarter of the way across the visible sky. He experimentally lifted his helmet an inch or two. A sharp gust of air scurried hurriedly around the contours of his face and slightly ruffled his hair. He threw the helmet all the way back and with exultation breathed in tremendous gulps of crisp, *fresh* air. For the first time that day his powerful frame rose to its full six feet of height and he stood statuesque, his shadow cast before him, a symbol of man against the cosmos.

Still, somehow his mind could not shift from the ever-present danger. Possible exhaustion of his food supply; the energy heating units of his space suit—of water. Once again his thoughts turned to the humor provided by the strange inhabitants

of Ganymede. He called out sharply to one of them: "How are you old chap?"

"How're *you* all chap," the grating reply floated back, thinned by the sparse atmosphere. Some guttural effect in the creature's voice seemed to place the emphasis on the word "you." And it sounded uncannily like a return question, infinitely more so than the echo-like effect it should have had! And also the speech had improved! Very definitely improved! Where before they had relayed back his sentences in an indistinguishable blur of sound, now some of the words stood out, sharp, clear!

"This chap doesn't need enunciation lessons," John muttered softly to himself. And as if to prove it the lips of the creature moved erratically, as if talking to itself in the identical manner that John had just done.

"Nice weather we're having," John phrased ironically as small flakes of ice formed on the end of his nose.

"Like hell it is!" came back the surprise retort.

John stood there aghast. The creature had emitted the very same reply that he had been *thinking,* but had not voiced!

The Ganymedian in front of him took on a more surprising aspect with each passing moment. For some reason nature had bestowed upon this travesty of human form a telepathic mental pick-up. Similar, in results, to the ones in use on earth, except that this was not a mechanical device. It was, undoubtedly, a far more efficient receiver of flesh and blood, or whatever substance this thing was composed of, capable of picking up thought waves as simply as a radio receiver picks up radio waves.

"It can do anything but understand," John found himself saying. He could only wonder why some scientist had not discovered these creatures before and dissected them to find out just how their peculiar brains operated.

And then, for the first time in many hours, his mind turned back to his fiancee, Joan Crandell. He cursed the stolid fates that had stranded him here on this godforsaken satellite with a bunch of damnfool mimics. In his mind he visualized Joan as he had last seen her. The golden, glory-sheen of her hair flowing softly down to her shoulders; her straight little nose and small, firm chin; her piquant expression and oh, *so* desirable lips. And last, but certainly not least her short, trim figure. Perhaps she wasn't the Venus ideal, but to his mind at least, she was infinitely more lovable—an ancient phrase, "and what's more she's got arms," seemed to go well with that thought. For a little more he accorded himself the luxury of seeing her in his mind's eye, and then slowly, sadly, shook his head, and looked up. His eyes popped in disbelief of what he saw! His hands trembled with fearful delight, wonder and amazement. It couldn't be! It wasn't possible! *But there she stood—Joan Crandell!* To the tiniest detail as he had seen her last! Here on this crazy moon! In an agony of bewilderment he cried out, "Joan! Joan!" He could say no more. The paralysis of surprise left his limbs and he dashed wildly forward. *"Joan!" and his arms reached out to grasp her, and twined about a hard, bony, mishapen, distorted, leathery form!* He recoiled in abject horror. These strange creatures—an instant before new toys to amuse and astound him were transformed into terror-ridden monsters. No longer a joke—but a tragedy! Joan, or rather the illusion of Joan was there no longer. In her place stood a stupid, blinking, *thing* that threatened his very sanity—his existence. Something snapped in his mind!

He ran. Miles he ran. His powerful, earthly muscles lending magic powers to his feet. Across broken, rock-hard plains —stumbling, falling, slipping, across stretches of mountain region and through dim valleys. And night descended upon him. Unfailing, relentless, it settled leaving everything pitch dark. And they followed him. Miles behind, but never giving up, never faltering. A mad man they followed who did not run, but leaped, fifty feet into the air, and screaming at his slow rate of descent barely touched the ground before he was off on another leap, even greater than the preceding one. A dozen times he was speared upon dangerous rocks—the tough substance of his suit the only thing between him and death. And as tiny leaks formed in his suit, the insidious cold crept in slowly, surely, numbing his body until each leap was a little shorter, a little less powerful than

the other. Until lost in a maze of bleak mountains he collapsed.

DAWN bolted deer-like over the black hills of Ganymede, and as if it had never interrupted its work, the distant sun beat down upon the frozen landscape with renewed vigor. A lone earth figure rolled over and groaned. Shakily it got to its feet and took a few trembling steps. John Hall, exhausted physically and mentally was all right again. The madness of the preceding night had left him, almost as suddenly as it had come upon him. It was almost as if kind nature had blotted out the portion of his brain which preserved memory, and left his mind, dulled, numb. In a daze, his once proud figure tripped along the devious mountain passes. Too tired to leap—barely capable of moving, John Hall threaded his tortuous way through regions only half recalled. No thoughts, simply a guiding instinct that urged him, warned him, that he must go this way to return to the space ship, and food—maybe rescue.

And a hundred yards behind him, unnoticed, trailed multiple, black, ungainly creatures, who stumbled when he stumbled, fell when he fell.

It was nearing twilight again when John Hall panted back into the region of his space-ship. Barely cognizant of what he was doing, he smashed a can of beans against the steel hull of the ship and devoured them without ceremony, animal-like. Then he sat wearily down upon a ruined metal bench and tried to relax. Weakly, but nevertheless desperately, he fought with himself. Trying to clear the cobwebs that cluttered up his brain and reason rationally again. Thoughts, like flitting ghosts, aroused tantilizingly, only to whisk down some hidden channel of his mind before he could fully grasp and comprehend them. One of the grotesque things, creatures, objects, whatever they were, drew close to him, its bulging eyes peering not inquisitively, but *fearfully* into his. He knew! The eluding coherency of thought came. The answer to the enigma lay in his own mind! His powerful earth mind. Scientists had always been aware that the mind radiates, energy, thoughts away from it. That one mind is capable of hypnotizing another, even across great distances. These inhabitants of Ganymede, with their acute mental receptivity, were slaves to his more powerful will—his every thought. And against their own desires they followed and imitated him. And through some unknown chemical reaction even took the form, momentarily, of some wished-for object. It was clear. But now again it wasn't. His mind was failing. Falling back into the abyss of blackness and incoherency! He stared a moment at one of the peculiar faces before him and as he stared it changed, grew smooth, black, ebony black—and God—blank! Blank like his mind—part of his mind, for through the rest of it swirled a fantasmagoria of images, and disconnected phrases. He was alone, or almost so. Those things were still here. It was getting darker . . . colder . . . so cold . . . was this all a dream? Then he stopped! For over the blank face of the thing in front of him flickered images, mirroring his thoughts, like some disconnected motion picture!

With incredible strength he tore away the protecting mass of his space-suit. The cold wind hit him, knifed him through and through. And he stepped forward. Walking, walking, and suddenly his great hands rose aloft in an agony of sorrow. His mighty voice bellowed above the elements of loneliness; of despair. And always, those grotesque, storm-swept, misshapen creatures fastened their wet, glistening eyes upon him and in the depths of them displayed rage as he displayed it; despair as he displayed it. And when he pounded his clenched fists in powerful blows upon his resounding chest, they pounded their gnarled limbs upon their shrunken chests in powerful mimicry.

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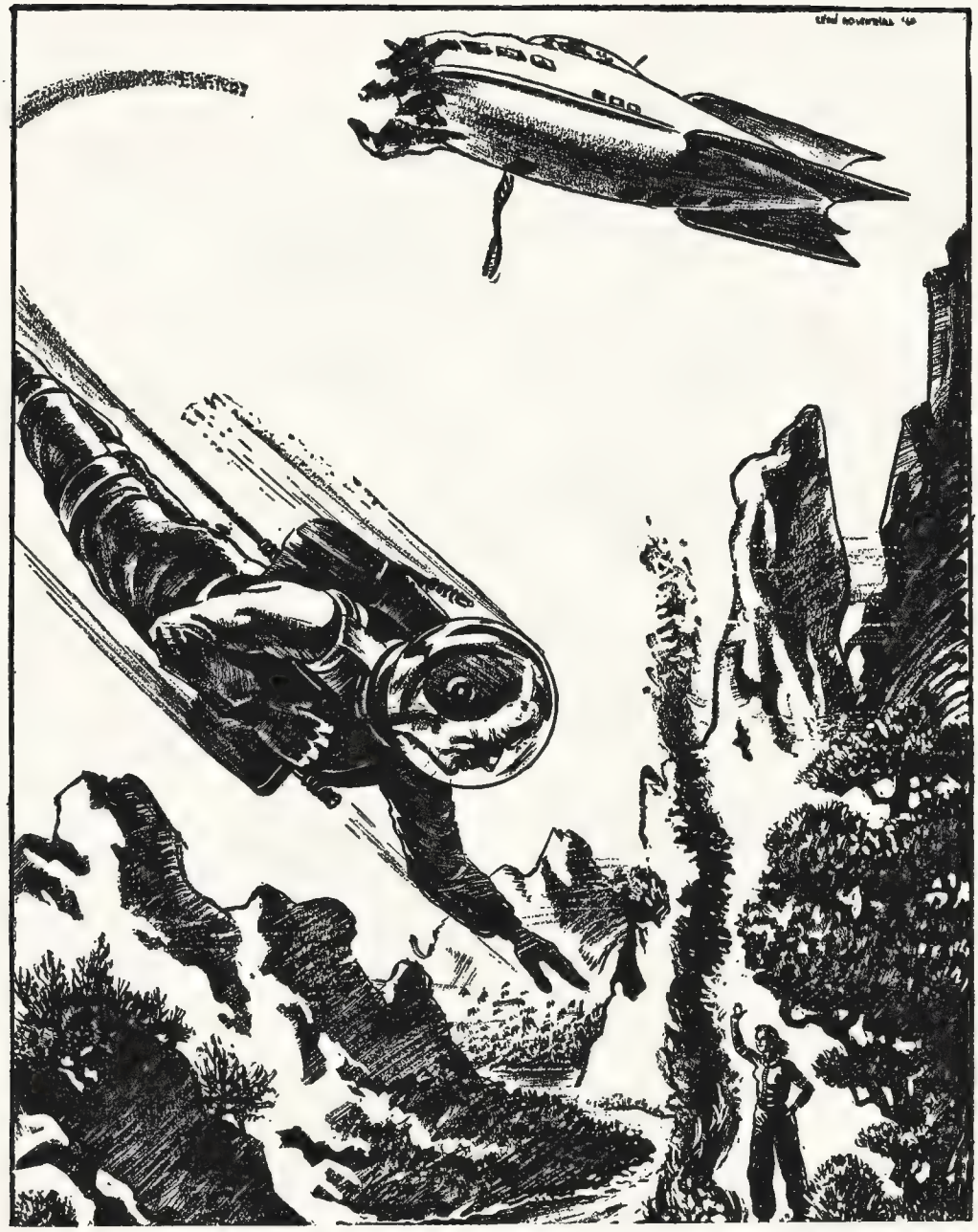
When the crew of the rescue ship "Space-Spear" landed, they turned back in horror at a planet of mad-things that shrieked, wept, raged and despaired in a manner that was more than imitation—that was real! And they could not help but shudder inwardly at the terrible fate that had befallen John Hall, and his horrible, unknowing revenge!



MUTINY ABOARD THE "TERRA"

By ROSS ROCKLYNNE

The threat of mutiny stalked Tarney's first command. It needed only the lovely stowaway to spark that Earth-bound space-freighter into a roaring hell-ship.

CAPTAIN JOHN TARNEY, striding aft on the upper deck, smiled to himself. One could never predict men. Outbound from Earth, the crew had hovered on the insolent side of insubordinacy. A rough lot at best, and probably bad to the core, they had done no more than stay within legal limits.

This changed, the instant the Interplanetary Trade Company ship *Terra* lifted herself from Io's weak, uninsistent gravitational clutches. Orders were carried out with a will. Incomprehensible, utterly —but gratifying. The best astrogator from the Marto-Tellurian Spatial Academy could not hope to succeed in the face of a crew's contempt. Tarney, who very nearly had that qualification, had seemed in for it, for a while. Well, things had changed, and Tarney felt that a load had been taken off his shoulders.

He went briskly down the corridor, past the upper-deck bunkers. He paused with one foot in the air. He sniffed. His pleasantly curved lips lost their smile. Unbelief grew in his grey, hard eyes.

"Damnation!" He turned around, and with a blistering, more potent curse, he fished a ring of keys from his belt.

In another ten seconds, he had pushed back the hatch of No. 2 auxiliary bunker. The rank odor of torpol seemed literally to fling itself at him. That was quite enough. He stepped back, locked the door. Bitterness showing in every line of his trimly uniformed figure, he made his way forward. He opened the transparent door to the control room.

Pilot-computer Richie raised his grizzled head from the chart table, surprise showing in his eyes.

"Thought you was on the way to hit the cork, Cap'n."

"So I was," said Tarney. Very deliberately, he lighted a cigarette. He added casually, watching Richie, "There's a load of torpol in No. 2 auxiliary bunker."

Richie's brows drew down. "You figure the crew smuggled it in, Cap'n?" His old eyes, gray and wise, were steady.

"Who else."

Richie dropped his pencil on the chart table, straightened his paunchy figure. He was middle aged, and suffered from a bad heart. He walked slowly to the winking control board, studying the gradually shifting panorama of the spangled heavens.

"Cap'n," he said, not turning around, "I guess you didn't find that torpol after all."

"Yes?"

"Yes, sir. Look here, Cap'n. You was shoved into the captain's berth straight from the academy, with the dewy look of the rookie still in your eyes. The crew resents it. They think that maybe me or one of the other boys should be at the helm. So the crew don't like you, which they don't mind showing."

"And which I noticed," said Tarney with sarcasm.

Richie said: "But they've been God's little angels since they took off from Io. They take out all their grief against you by smuggling torpol. So, speaking as an old spacer, which I am and you ain't, you better play up to 'em a little. Meanin', sir, drop a few hints you know they got torpol aboard, guy the life out of them and keep 'em on tenterhooks, and let 'em know you're havin' fun, but *don't* call 'em to account. And you take my word for it, after this trip, they'll take you to their hearts, and they'll be the finest captain-fearin' crew you ever seen. Take my word for it." He paused. "Else, they ain't above mutiny."

"Torpol," said Tarney, "is a drug. "That load could wreck a hundred or more human lives. To hell with your scheme." He sat down at the communication board. As he picked up the engine room tube, he added, "Thanks, anyway, Richie."

"Yes, sir?" That was the voice of the chief engineer.

Tarney said grimly, "Mackson, I want you, Bramley, and Stoker up here in the control room. Double-quick, now."

Mackson was silent. Then, his rumbling voice sardonic: "Yes, sir. Of course, sir."

Tarney hung up, leaning back in the swivel-chair, eyes lidded, smoke curling up from his cigarette, where it was held between two blunt, slightly stained fingers. He caught Richie's apprehensive glance, and smiled.

"Mutiny it might be, Richie." He shrugged.

SHORTLY, the door was pushed open. Mackson, his broad, grim face speckled and smudged with grime, edged through the doorway, followed by his two assistants, both smaller men. He stood at ease with deliberate insolence working his powerful, black-bearded jaws over a wad of tobacco.

"Reportin', Cap'n."

Tarney said, face expressionless, "Mackson, I had occasion to take a look at No. 2

auxiliary bunker a few minutes ago. Somebody smuggled a load of torpol aboard. I want you three men to chuck it out the sally port. That's all."

Mackson chewed steadily, and though his lips smiled sardonically, his eyes grew bleak and cold.

"You're sure that's all there is to it, Cap'n?"

Tarney came to his feet, rage stretching the skin tight and glistening over his high cheekbones.

"You heard me, didn't you?" he said, in a low controlled tone. "I'm in no mood to point out the rank insubordinacy of torpol-smuggling. I'm giving you and your men the easy way out. Chuck it out the sally port."

Mackson held his eyes, a sneer growing in his own.

Then he turned, waved his two assistants away from the door.

"One side, men," he rumbled, "and let the lady in."

The door opened. A girl walked in. She stood hesitantly in the doorway, as if debating flight. Then, on the insistence of one of the crew behind her, came the rest of the way, until she stood beside Mackson, dwarfed by his hugeness. Her eyes roved around the control room, assimilating Richie's horrified expression, then passed on to Tarney.

"Hello, Captain Tarney," she said.

Tarney held himself rigid, caught up in the wild impossibility of this tableau: Mackson, slowly chewing, his black eyes filled with grim humor; other men, edging into the control room, watching him with sadistic expressions; and the girl herself, clad in nothing but sandals and a faded gingham dress, eying him from deep hazel eyes.

Tarney rested his hand on the back of his chair, clenching it. His voice edged into the simmering silence. It sounded as if another person had spoken.

"Who is this girl, Mackson?" Tarney demanded.

A little chuckle wheezed out of Mackson's bull throat. "Why, Cap'n, she's Mary—little Mary from the female section of the penal colony on Io. Never existed a wickeder little girl, no, sir." He winked. "Well, sir, seems I was walking past your cabin, just yesterday it was, and I heard little Mary hummin' a sparklin' tune while she combed her hair. I was shocked, Cap'n, and so help me, I didn't believe it until I opened the door. And there was Mary!"

"In the cap'n's cabin!" said a half dozen shocked voices.

"Ain't that so, Mary?" Mackson pinched the girl's arm. She moved away from him. Her eyes dropped from Tarney's, came back as if with a struggle. She smiled twistedly. Then she tossed her head with defiance.

"Looks like that's the story, Captain. Looks like I'd just made a break from the colony, looking for some way to get back to Earth, when I ran into you. You liked my looks, and decided to do me a favor."

"A favor, see?" Mackson took up the story. "And so help me, Cap'n, that's the truth! Because your little Mary is an honest girl, for all her shortcomings, and she wouldn't tell no lie. Leastways, not if the home authorities got to questioning her." A grieved note came into his rumbling, smug voice. "And if *you* can smuggle a girl aboard, Cap'n, so help me, I don't see why *we* can't run a little torpol into the docks."

His eyes glinted.

"And don't act too hasty in this, Cap'n," he drawled. "Every man jack and officer in the crew happens to be behind me in this, and if worst comes to worst, the girl's ready to tell her story. Ain't that so, Mary?" He pinched her. She struck his hand away.

Her lips drooped. "That's so, Captain. I've made my bargain and I stick to it, even if I have to go back to the colony. If worst comes to worst, I'll tell the authorities the—well, the truth." She tossed her head doggedly.

Tarney's lips finally moved. "The truth," he said. "The truth!" A low, acid laugh burst from him. "Get out of here. Find yourself an unoccupied cabin, some place. Go on, get out!"

She shrugged, her full lips twisted in a half-smile. "If that's the way you feel about it, Captain."

SHE turned and left the room. Tarney, with fingers he tried hard to keep from shaking, lit another cigarette, exhaled a cloud of smoke. His eyes roved with grad-

ually building fury and contempt over the grouped men. Rough, unshaved faces, insolent with hate, met his eyes.

His voice grated. "I'll be calling your bluff, men. I'm changing that order. Leave the torpol where it is. And the girl. I'll be producing both of them later on to your eventual damnation. Now you can clear out."

Not a man moved.

Mackson, fire growing in his eyes, said harshly, "Of all the damn fools!" He took a step forward, sneering. "If you think you can—"

"Clear out!" snapped Tarney, fists balled at his sides.

Mackson stared at him in unbelief; with a curse, turned and strode from the room, his men trailing after him.

Richie stepped up, grabbed Tarney's arm.

"Hold it, man!" he snapped. Tarney's eyes were bleak and cold. "As a captain, you can't stoop to punching your men in the nose."

Tarney turned, smiling peculiarly. "I doubt that I'll be captain much longer," he said slowly. "You see, Richie, this is the prelude to mutiny. They've got the girl to use against me, but I've got the torpol-smuggling to use against them—with the girl's help, and yours."

"You're crazy, man," Richie said helplessly. "What makes you think she'll testify against them in the torpol matter?"

Tarney shrugged. "She doesn't like Mackson. She'll keep her promise to him, her payment for a chance to escape Io. Mackson was supposed to hold her over me as a threat. But she won't lie any more than she's supposed to. So I'll be stripped of my captain's stripes, while they'll be sent up for a minimum of ten years. Which probably means mutiny. Either way, I'm in the middle. But I'd prefer to see them sent up." His jaw hardened.

"But if Mackson forces the girl to testify against you on *all* counts—" Richie began.

Tarney stared at him. He snapped his fingers, and with a barely muttered expletive, loped out the door, took the starboard companionway two at a time. He walked swiftly down the corridor.

He heard Mackson's voice, raised harshly. Tarney pushed open the door to his left. Mackson swung around, retaining his grip on the girl's forearm.

"You," he said dangerously.

"Me," agreed Tarney. "Let the girl go." go."

"The hell you say!" He returned Tarney's look mockingly.

Tarney cast his eyes over the girl. She had been struggling. Her long golden hair was dishelved. With her free arm, she thrust her hair back over her shoulders.

"Well, don't stand there," she panted. "He's breaking my arm."

Tarney said contemptuously, "You asked for it, didn't you? I didn't come up here to save you. I just wanted to make sure he doesn't wring any extra promises out of you. You're testifying in my behalf when it comes to the torpol, and don't forget it."

"That's what I wanted to do," she cried bitterly. "He tried to force me—"

"Shut up, you hussy!" Mackson roared. His open hand slapped resoundingly on her cheek.

Tarney saw red. He took one step forward, his balled fist snapped forward a scant six inches to crack on Mackson's jaw. Mackson roared again, released the girl and threw himself at Tarney.

Tarney met him coolly, striking aside his illy-timed blows.

"Take that!" he said coldly, and used a one-two technique that sent Mackson bowling backward over the bed. Mackson staggered wildly erect. Tarney waded in, let loose a blow that had all his compact mass of hardened muscle and bone behind it. Mackson slumped, and fell for good. Tarney watched him painfully getting to his feet. He weaved, holding his forehead. His groggy eyes caught Tarney's.

"This is the end of you," he said thickly, and muttering senselessly to himself, left the room.

The girl drew her torn dress up around her bare shoulders.

"What did he mean?" she said, almost whispering, her voice was so low.

Tarney let his hard eyes rove over her. With shock, he saw what he had not noticed before, namely, that her rounded face and almost translucent complexion gave her a rare kind of purely feminine beauty. Not much of the criminal

showed in her perfectly molded lips, either.

"He meant mutiny." He sighed. "All right, baby face. It's down to the control room with us. This is the show-down. The blow-off. The big push. Come on!"

She fell in beside him, running at times to keep up with his rapid steps.

TARNEY ushered her in ahead of him and bolted the transparent door. He crossed the room, took three Hamptons, heavy, elaborate hand weapons, from a locker. He thrust one at the girl. "Take it, baby face! Whether you can use it or not."

She struck the weapon out of his hand, her face furious. Then the expression changed to sullenness. "Oh, call me what you want," she said crossly. She picked up the Hampton, handling it as if she knew every screw and coil in its interior. Tarney shrugged his broad shoulders in incomprehension at Richie, gave him a Hampton, too.

Richie's eyes were pained. "So it's come to this."

"That's it. How far are we into the asteroid belt?"

"Too damned far," Richie muttered.

"Watch the board, then, and keep us clear."

He stepped to the transparent door. He caught a glimpse of a mass of shadowy figures in the corridor. He leaped back, bore the girl to the floor as the shot sounded. There was a neat hole drilled in the door. Came another shot. And another. The door swung idly, its lock blasted away.

Richie shouted in exasperation, "How can I stop a crack-up if there's nobody in the engine room to give me power?"

Mackson's voice sounded, rolling up the corridor.

"Tarney! We're bound to get you sooner or later. We don't want to murder you. All we want is control of the ship. We'll sell that torpol on Mars, unload the prison brat some place else, and that'll be the end of it. What do you say?"

Tarney bellowed back scornfully, "We're on the way to Earth. If you've got any sense, you'll get back in the engine room. If an asteroid shows up in our path—"

Then he heard a rush of footsteps in the corridor. He bounced to his feet, fired coldly into the very midst of the attackers. One, he noticed with a frown, was garbed in a pressure suit. The projectile exploded briefly.. A scream of pain struck the air. The attackers retreated. Tarney leaped back A rain of projectiles exploded against the solid metal bulkheads. Tarney popped out again, returning the fire. He dropped again, in time to stop the girl from leaping into the return fire.

"What's the big idea of giving me a gun then?" she demanded furiously.

Richie's voice sounded atop hers. "Cap'n," he said faintly.

Tarney's blood congealed at the note in his voice. He levered himself to his feet, stood over the control board.

"I see," he said softly. There was a tiny point of light, growing in size, on the hair-lines of the starboard vision plate.

Richie read dials, and played with an inegator set into the board. His face was wet with sweat when he raised his eyes. "This gives us five minutes. And they don't answer from the engine room."

Tarney turned, face lined and pale.

He shouted: "Mackson, I'm not fooling. There's a small asteroid coming up on us. We need power!" Almost everything he said was drowned in an answering burst of fire.

Tarney turned slowly back to Richie, two tiny lines of apprehension showing between his wide-set eyes.

"Anything we can do at all?" he clipped out.

"If we ain't got power—" The sentence dribbled away.

Tarney's teeth clicked shut. He whirled, went for the locker again, emptying his gun through the door, without result except to draw a return. From the locker, he broke out three leatheroid packages. He broke a tiny string with his thumbnail. The boxes broke in a half dozen places, sprung apart. Three pressure suits, complete from helmet to bulging oxygen compact, lay haphazardly on the floor.

He gestured to the wide-eyed girl.

"Into it!" he snapped. He shoved one at her. "You too, Richie." While he was talking, he fired once more through the door, drew another burst. With the accustomedness of training, he was buckling his own helmet down. He helped the girl on with hers. She smiled at him impudently through the transparent helmet.

"I thought captains went down with their ships."

"Not if I've got anything to say about it." Deep in his mind was the bitter truth, however. His first command, and it seemed irrevocably lost. And after this, what lay ahead?

He didn't have much time to speculate about it. Richie said, faintly, "Here it comes, Cap'n." A deathly pale expression grew on his face. He clutched at his left side, and sagged to the floor.

Tarney understood that. He leaped to the older man's side, slipped an arm around him.

"Richie!" he said sharply.

There was a gruesome expression of pain on Richie's face.

"That damned heart of mine," he gritted faintly.

Tarney looked around. "Come here, Mary." She came across the room, grotesque in the pressure suit, biting at her full lower lip.

She said, unexpectedly, "Thanks anyway for calling me Mary."

His eyes snapped. "Not that you deserve it. Look here. Let me have your hand. We might as well be to—" He snapped around then, as he caught sound of a scraping foot. He swung around, off balance, but brought his Hampton up and fired. He fell on one elbow. The man in the doorway, a Holloway vacuum feeder tender, Pany by name, clutched at his chest, gulped, and fell on his face, without a sound. His own soundlessness seemed to intensify that which then smote Tarney's ears. Hell broke loose.

Tarney seemed to fly in a vicious arc across the control room. The thunder of shivering, splintering steel mainbeams was an incredible, pounding vibration. A man's scream sounded once. Tarney, more than half unconscious, felt the sigh of a strengthening, soughing wind. Then he was tossed again. Vaguely, he was aware that his grip on Richie was as strong as death itself. In the darkness that abruptly came, another figure was hurled into him. It might have been the dead man in the doorway, it might have been the girl. He reached out, wrapped his arm around the figure, and held on. Motion, fantastic and hurtling, came. Darkness insinuated itself into his mind, blotted out his last coherent thought. He was plunging on . . . and on . . . into a depth past plumbing. . . .

MOTIONLESSNESS. Tarney held his eyes closed, seeking to extract from this feeling of unconcernedness every last second of bliss. No good. Thoughts, remembrances, clicked into place; until the pattern of them was so solid and complete that he could no longer evade full consciousness.

He opened his eyes then, was caught and held in comprehension by the broad, circling sweep of the stars. Stars! There they were, in plain sight, and there was nothing but empty, chillingly empty space between him and them. No vision plate, no ship to shut out the cold, incredible distances.

His first thought was for Richie; safe, he saw, with relief, breathing shallowly in the crook of Tarney's arm, but with the flush of life still on his grizzled face. The girl Mary was stirring, even as he sought signs of consciousness in her relaxed, now childlike beauty. Her eyes opened. Then she smiled.

Her lips formed the word, "Hello!" but there was was no sound. These pressure suits were not provided with headsets. Shoulder blasts they had, and food and water kits, and oxygen compacts, but little else. A man could live for perhaps three days in these miniature lifeboats.

Tarney twisted, turned around. As he had expected, the *Terra* was not far away. It was spinning, with about a three-minute period, Tarney diagnosed. The entire stern —jets, engine room, aft bunkers, were gone; and a good quota of mutineers with it, if not all. To judge by the starboard bulkheads, a giant can-opener had been used further to complete the demolition. A jagged rent forward attested to Tarney's, Richie's and the girl's means of exit.

Three or four points to Tarney's left, setting a frame of reference for the motion of the ship, an appreciable disk of light glowed. An asteroid, of course. Not likely the one that brought catastrophe, though. It was growing in apparent diameter. A faint spark of hope took fire in Tarney's veins. This might be one of the Nocturne planetoids; as such, it would have an appreciable gravitation, an atmosphere, perhaps even some traces of fauna

and flora. Well, they and the ship were headed in that direction, at least, so no use in using the shoulder blasts to get there.

Tarney caught the girl's eyes on him. Her lips moved, but he didn't catch what she said.

"What?"

He made it out this time. "Are we going to die?"

His glance involuntarily swept to Richie; he winced. Then,

"No. Of course we're not," his lips said.

"Maybe you're lying, Captain Tarney. But I wouldn't be afraid. The reason I asked you—well, I just wanted to tell you something. It's—a little bit important to me."

Her eyes were large, unblinking, and somehow too near his. He broke away, painfully conscious of the slow thud of his heart.

"Never mind that now." He pointed. His lips formed a sentence. "We'll be landing there."

She looked toward the growing asteroid and nodded.

Ten minutes, by Tarney's chronometer, passed.

At that time, Tarney guessed that the inevitable had happened. The *Terra* had apparently taken up an orbit around the planetoid. The planetoid, a huge, exciting white disk in the heavens, attesting to the presence of an atmosphere at the least, hung, at a rough guess, a thousand miles off. The ship was now in the process of whipping herself around it.

Richie was still unconscious; and likely to remain so, Tarney thought glumly. Unpleasant thoughts were seeking their way to the foreground of his thoughts, now. He could have wished that Mackson and all the rest were dead. Yet, he remembered that at least one of the mutineers had taken the precaution of donning a pressure suit. He laughed grimly. It would not be enough to be marooned, they'd have to be tormented by Mackson, too.

He sought the girl's eyes. "Can you work your shoulder blasts?" She hesitated. "You'll have to make the best of it," he said surlily. After all, she was nothing more nor less than an escaped convict; what happened to her would be no prod on his conscience. He showed her the rocket control stud at her hip, however. He added, "When I give the word, you swing your body for direction. Landing, you throw your legs up, so the blasts point down. Get that?"

She nodded quickly, her eyes fastened on his with utmost seriousness.

He swung his speculating glance on the planetoid. Somehow, it seemed to have grown larger. An elliptical orbit? Or was the ship falling slowly? He shrugged his shoulders, cast his command at the girl. She nodded brightly, pressed the stud at her hip.

Tarney watched her mercilessly while the pale white flames emanating from her shoulders rackingly threw her in every direction but the right one. One, two minutes passed before she finally established the delicate balance that sent her on a one-directional path.

Tarney caught up with her, nodded briefly as he caught sight of her white, strained face, and then forged ahead.

THE planetoid grew. Tarney cushioned himself against the fall by throwing his body horizontal to the uprushing surface. No instruments except his senses, but he judged that the gravity was perhaps a fifth of the Terrestrial norm. Not too much, nor too little. Yet, landing with Richie in his arms was going to be a delicate task.

Seven or eight miles up, atmosphere whipped at him. Sunlight splashed from a tiny valley, rippled and flicked from innumerable facet-like surfaces; low, shattered mountain ranges, Tarney diagnosed, with sheer escarpments dropping into depressions. As they fell nearer, he caught traces of green, of vast yellow fields; and more than twice a silver thread fell from the low mountains. Water, vegetation, air; what more could one wish? Tarney's mood grew lighter and gayer with each mile that fell away; to be caught up short by sight of poor old Richie's deathly pale face.

Grimly, he watched the valley come rushing up. He threw up his legs at the last second, was cushioned on the downspurting jets. He fell, then, with what he judged was no more than an acceleration of two feet to the second.

He laid Richie down, turned to see the girl come spinning down.

"Legs up!" he shouted.

She had not forgotten her lesson. She came down on her feet, staggered, and fell to a sitting position. Tarney helped her to her feet, restraining a grin. She released her breath in a long sigh, her cheeks flushed.

Tarney took a quick look around. This was a plain, all lush with yellow, waving grass. Waving grass! That was good. It meant a decent atmosphere, perhaps and probably a decent pressure, too.

He saw the girl fumbling at her helmet.

"Stop that!" he commanded sharply. He moved up beside her, worked over a governor. "That'll do. The air pressure in your suit will gradually die down to conform with that of the planet. Come over here. Let's see how Richie's doing."

Richie was stirring, the flush of fever on his cheeks. His lips mumbled. Tarney gathered that he was asking for water. He manipulated Richie's suit controls. A tiny tube came from the interior mechanism. Tarney maneuvered it into Richie's mouth. The old spacer was conscious enough to suck in the life-giving moisture. His eyes fluttered open, crinkled with pain.

"You all right?" demanded Tarney.

Richie whispered, "Not much. What I need is my medicine, boy. Where are we?"

"On a livable planet. Luck played into our hands to some measure." He briefly described the plain, the suggestion of trees on the slopes of the low, clear-cut mountains. Then his voice sharpened with anxiety. "And I suppose your medicine is in the ship. Damn!" The expletive left his lips bitterly. He turned his head upward. This was a bad break! If he had thought to stop in the ship before— Well, no use crying now.

He stood up, gestured to the girl. "Look here. Richie's in a bad way. Can't move him now. Can you stay here, look after him while I make the trip back?"

Her hazel eyes widened in alarm. "The trip back?"

"Naturally. This is a low gravity planet. Our ship's out there, stacked to the brim with things we'll need anyway." He stopped. "Look here. Do you realize what we're up against?"

"Well—" She stopped. For some reason, a smile played over her full face, a mischievous glint sparkled in her eyes. "Naturally, Captain Tarney, or aren't I supposed to call you that any more? Are you trying to tell me we may be here for good? At the very least, that we won't be picked up for weeks or months?"

"Perhaps years," said Tarney, suspicious of her smile. He studied her. His eyes turned hard and cynical. "You feel it's a good break for you. Rescue means the penal colony on Io again, eh? Well, baby face, remembering that if it hadn't been for you, *Terra* would still be on her way, I don't mind letting you know the sooner the authorities put you out of contact with society, the better I'll like it. You're pure poison and I'd rather not have you around."

The smile left her face. Blood rushed from her cheeks. "Smug, aren't you?" she bit out furiously.

"Stay here," said Tarney, pressed the stud at his hip, and went soaring up into the violet-blue sky without difficulty.

FOUR hours later, and he was back. He came swooping down through the night sky, Richie's emergency medical cabinet strapped over his neck, a hundred and sixty pounds in cases of canned goods dragging him down. The cases were tied with bits of rope filched from the lazarette, and he was holding onto them with a rope handle. The ship was on the other side of the planetoid; so was the Sun, now. He strained his anxious eyes downward. Where was that valley? Four hours out of Richie's life, gone now. He caught sight of a tiny, firefly glow. His face lighted with relief and swift, remorseful gratitude. If the girl had had sense enough and ingenuity enough to start a fire, good for her!

The canned goods crashed down from fifteen feet. Some of the cans would be sprung. No matter, there'd be food enough for a while. Under the release of weight, he zoomed up again; then manipulated his control and came down.

The girl came running out of the gloom. Her space suit was off.

"How is he?"

"All right." Her teeth were chattering.

He grabbed her arm, started toward the fire. "Cold?"

She looked up at him briefly, her eyes

luminous. "Scared." She shivered slightly.

Tarney stumbled over something, looked down. His eyes widened, and the breath escaped through his teeth. He looked at her sharply.

"What's this?"

She laughed shakily. "You guess, Captain. A wolf. A bloto. A peegee pussy."

Smothering an oath, Tarney turned the creature. Fur, six-clawed legs, sharp, stained fangs—and a bloody cavity in the forehead, where the girl's Hampton had caught him. He glanced at her sharply, and leaped forward in time to put his arms under her sagging body.

Swearing steadily and profanely, he dropped her beside the fitfully burning heap of long grass. He disengaged the medicine chest from his shoulders, with fumbling, heavily gloved fingers extracted Richie's suppressant, shook out two pills. Now, water! He twisted the water coils from Richie's suit. He raised Richie's head. Pills and water went down, and whether Richie was conscious or not, he didn't know. None the less, that should do the trick, and for the next few minutes he heaped grass on the fire until a good, steady blaze was going. At the end of that time, he took his suit off, breathing in fresh, wholly satisfying air. But it was cold. He took off his captain's jacket, threw it over Richie. The girl was a different problem. He knew she was awake, had been watching him for some time.

He crossed to her. "Cold?"

Her eyes were glistening pools in the half-lights. Her teeth chattered. "Yes. What of it?"

He said civilly, "Exercise will help. I'm ripping those cases from the canned goods, to build some sort of protection from the cold for Richie. You can gather grass—a lot of it."

She shrugged. "If it's for him."

She moved away from the fire, carrying her Hampton beneath her belt. Tarney went to work on the cases, using his shoe for a hammer. With the cans scattered haphazardly, the crates hammered apart, ends studded with nails, there was no difficulty hammering the pieces together into a triangular sort of hut. Working together, they piled it thick with grass outside, covered the floor with grass inside. Tarney moved Richie in. He was breathing more steadily now. In great part, his fever had subsided. That was that. He slowly moved toward his pressure suit. He was weary to the bone, but his work was not finished.

THE girl watched him wordlessly while he got into the suit.

Finally he answered her unspoken question.

"You might as well know now as later that our position isn't as good as I thought it was."

Her full lips curled in a synical smile. "Not for you, anyway, Captain Tarney."

Tarney said, "Or for you. I thought I could take my time getting things out of the ship. I can't. The ship is falling, spiraling around the planet to an eventual crack-up. It's still got six or seven hours. After that—"

"I get it. What if it should fall here in the valley?"

He smiled. "That's stretching even coincidence. Oh, there'd be an explosion, and that'd be the end of us. The point is, I have to go to work now, unloading."

She said suddenly, "What about the men?"

Tarney shrugged wearily. "Dead."

"Mackson?"

He peered at her through the flames. He said slowly, "Dead. Must be."

"You should have checked up on his body," she said listlessly, and Tarney entered Richie's little hut. He stooped over the man.

"You all right?"

Richie's eyes bored up at him through the gloom. "I ain't goin' to live through this, boy," he said with deliberate intonation.

"The hell you say!" said Tarney. He bit at his lip.

"Nope. Nope. Look here, Cap'n. Are you in a bad way or not? Can you live on this planet? You might be here some time, understand. I don't recall anything with this gravity in the Ephemeris; and even if a ship does sight her, they ain't goin' to break their orbit to do a bit of explorin'. You're castaways, and you're going to have to make the best of it. And what's so bad about it? You've got this girl Mary to keep you company." His eyes twinkled.

Tarney said slowly, "How about ship's radio?"

"Oh, it'll carry your message a few million miles. One chance in a thousand. After old *Terra* crashes, even that chance will be gone. And say you were rescued. What about the girl? Back she goes to Io."

Tarney growled sharply, "Where she belongs."

"Mebbe not," said Richie, eyes closing wearily. "Mebbe not. Think it over, boy."

Shaking his head, Tarney left the hut. He saw now that the quick night was going. The Sun was sharp on the horizon. He scanned the little valley from one hemming mountain to another. A new world! He took a last draught of the cold air, that had in it a promise of warmth to come, then buckled his helmet down.

"I'll be going," he told the girl, somehow unable to meet her eyes, and painfully aware of the fact.

She said casually, "So soon? . . . There's a drove of peegee pussies or whatever headed this way."

Her head snapped around in the direction she nodded. He felt the quick thrill of alarm. Several hundred yards away, he caught sight of a surging blot on the landscape. It changed outline as it came toward them. Then he caught sight of individual figures.

With pursed lips, he walked out toward the silent pack. His Hampton came up, fired. The projectile exploded briefly in the midst of the pack, and the echoes rolled up and down the valley. The pack broke. A coughing, blood-congealing murmur rose on the air. Tarney shot again, caught sight of reddened eyes. The third and fourth shots sent the creatures reluctantly into the distance.

Tarney turned slowly, his thoughts humming. "You'll have to hold them off. Can do?"

She smiled with slow impudence. "I did yesterday. Tend to your job."

None the less, he detected a shadow of foreboding in her eyes. They stood there, looking at each other. Tarney winced. Good God! What could this girl have done that landed her in a penal colony? Her yellow hair was blowing in the wind now, and the shine of the Sun was in her hazel eyes. Except for her tattered clothing, which tactlessly revealed parts of her body, she could well have been an ordinary girl, with none of her shocking past to cast a blot of distrust on Tarney's mind.

"I'm going." His voice was faint, faraway.

She said, still holding his eyes, "Don't forget the coffee. And the salt. And the sugar."

"No. No, of course not." He shot up into the air, then, and looking down, saw her wave half-heartedly. She receded to a dot; and Tarney followed her with his eyes until she disappeared, and felt the ache of a vast loneliness when she did.

AFTER an hour and a half, the *Terra* was visible, a tiny dot reflecting the sunlight. It was still rotating, a depressing sight with her battered forward section, and her gaping, twisted rear.

He shut off his blasts, finally, stood in the airless corridor that formerly had led into the control room, enclosed by the half-gloom. He moved slowly, reluctantly down the corridor. Here and there he came across a twisted, bloated body. A ship of the dead, in all truth. Yet, of Mackson and others he saw nothing. What did that mean? That they had been ejected by the rush of escaping air, that their bodies were far back there, thousands of miles? The thought was welcome, but not conclusive. He breathed no easier. Doubt and unease nagged at the back of his mind.

He drew himself from his half-stupor with an impatient exclamation. His job was imperative. He worked his way down a companionway, thrust open the door of the galley lazarette.

He stood in the doorway, suddenly turned rigid with wild disbelief. The blood pounded upward to a roaring crescendo in his temples. He reeled, clutched at the door jamb, striving to digest the implications of what he saw.

Or rather, of what he didn't see. For the storeroom floor and shelves, that should be stacked high with canned goods, condiments, concentrated milk and fruit supplies, coffee, tea, and in fact the whole food supply of the *Terra,* were—empty!

Empty! Gutted!

Tarney shook his head dazedly, opened and blinked his eyes. Suddenly, he urged

himself into the lazarette, half idiotically ran his hands over the shelves, as if he would trust nothing less than his sense of touch, now. The full truth was there, however. Someone had been here, and since last night, too!

Mackson? He turned, sickened—and again froze; this time, because he was looking squarely into the muzzle of a Hampton. Froze in motion, and seemed to raise his eyes in slow motion to meet the eyes of him who held the deadly, threatening weapon.

It was almost with a shock that he laid eyes on the man's helmeted face. Queer that he should have been expecting Mackson. This was one of the accumulator men, Pitto by name.

They stared at each other, eye to eye.

Tarney's lips twisted. "Well?"

Pitto's tobacco-stained teeth exposed themselves. "Well, nothing, Cap'n," he smirked. "Funny how you fell into this trap. I been waiting for you some hours now, ever since the boys unloaded the poor old *Terra*."

"Who," said Tarney with dangerous patience, "are the boys?" They were reading lips; Tarney had learned that art at the Academy; Pitto in the engine room, where the Wittenberg howl rendered voices sometimes useless.

"Mackson. Bramley. Stoker. O'Malley. Me."

"How did you escape?"

"We were in pressure suits. The rest of the crew was sure we could take the control room before anything sizable, like that asteroid, came along. They was wrong. We," he said, "was right." He grinned unhealthily. "We woke up, and there was this planetoid swimming around below."

Tarney nodded slowly, his mind humming. Small chance to surprise Pitto. The man was too watchful. What then? Suddenly he was remembering Richie and the girl. Remorse and desperation stabbed at him. This was no plot against him alone. These were men who saw the truth. There'd be little chance of rescue; and a woman. . . . His mind shuddered away from the thought.

Pitto broke into his thoughts. He had stepped to one side of the doorway, still transfixing Tarney with the Hampton.

"Out," his slow-moving lips formed. "You go back to Mackson. Move."

Tarney moved, on out the doorway, under the prodding of Pitto's weapon ascended the companionway, and in another few seconds had thrust himself out into space, shoulder blasts spurting their pale white flames, Pitto to the left of him, gesturing with his Hampton to show the right direction. Thus the planetoid came falling up toward them, and Tarney saw himself helpless to evade the fate in store for him, though his mind was a churning storehouse of undigested, impractical plans for escape. Yet, escape he must, and quickly. For eating into his mind was the thought of the girl and of Richie.

IT was a desperate, foolhardy chance he took, one that grew out of a bare impulse, one that promised death. In Pitto's eyes, he knew, his action would look like pure suicide, for Pitto would have no scruples about murdering him, if worst came to worst.

He twisted his body, touched the stud at his hip. Pale flames lashed out, beat against the bare fringes of the atmosphere that whipped at them some seven or eight miles above the surface. His body was hurled forward, straight toward Pitto, the distance between them halving in the second that followed.

Yet, even in that short space of time, Tarney saw startlement and then incredulous, tight-lipped rage sweep Pitto's stubbled, evil face. Purpose followed soon after. The Hampton came up, fired point-blank. Tarney heard the tiny, snapping beat of it, then the Herculean blast of the explosion, as the projectile passed through the bulging fabric of the suit, and exploded behind, with the one-eighth second trigger release. The concussion sent Tarney hurtling end over end, helpless, his skin and lungs, suddenly released of five pounds of pressure, burning with white fire.

Pitto! The thought roared back into Tarney's mind. He pressed the stud at his hip, let the blasts carry him in what direction they would. He was conscious now of bleeding nostrils, of an incredible agony. Yet, the major part of his scheme had worked.

He stabilized himself, then saw the

planetoid growing, swelling like a balloon that some cosmic giant was blowing even bigger. He turned his head wildly, but in that broad expanse of violet sky he saw no sign of his captor. Good. And in spite of the intolerable laboring of his burning lungs, he ejected a laugh from his bleeding lips.

He dropped deeper into the atmosphere, conscious that his mind was hazing under the terrific punishment of a rarefied atmosphere that he had taken. Pitto had fired with only one intention, and that more or less by instinct. A punctured suit in open space is tantamount to death; he had accomplished his purpose, but in that split second his reactions failed to include the fact that atmosphere, thin but breatheable, surrounded them. Well and good, the plan had worked; and Tarney wearily fell to a landing amongst a grove of trees between two high-rising escarpments, dead weary to the bone. He lay, panting, and try though he would, unconsciousness, whether sleep or faintness, overtook him.

THE snapping of a twig wakened him. He froze, full wakefulness surging through him. It was still day. High in the dark sky, the sharply delineated, tiny sun hung. A thin wind swept timidly through the fantastically twisted limbs of these tiny trees.

His eyes swiveled. Again came the sound, far to his right. Cautiously, he drew himself to his knees, his head turned in that direction.

The low murmur of voices swelled with the rise of the wind.

Then, from out of a tangled growth of barbed vines, Mackson pushed his way. Three other men, Bramley, Stoker and O'Malley, came after, holding the vines out of the way with two fingers, letting them snap back as they broke clear.

The four of them came on, at steady pace. Tarney shrank back, heart pounding. If one of them should let his eyes turn in this direction for more than a second, it would be all up with him. Pitto had relieved him of his Hampton; he had nothing but his bare fists to work with.

Mackson halted opposite him, his massive, black-bearded jaws steadily chewing on a wad of rough cut.

He ejected a stream of amber liquid, wiped his thick lips with the back of a hairy forearm.

He cast a glance at O'Malley, scorn in his eyes.

O'Malley said, doubtfully it seemed to Tarney, "Their camp's ahead, Mackson, I tell you. I seen their fire last night coming down with the last load. Either it's them or there's other people on the planet, which don't seem possible."

Stoker sighed wearily. "We could have used the pressure suits if we'd have known it was this far."

"I thought it was only a few miles." O'Malley's voice was sullen. "Anyway, we should have waited until Pitto come back with Tarney."

Mackson spat again. "Don't know but what this is a wild goose chase, men." He scratched his head, eyes frowning in speculation. "So help me, we ain't in much of a hurry anyway. They'll keep."

Bramley, a thin, nervous sort of man, tittered. "It was you wanted to hurry. You said we was likely goin' to be here a long time, and the sooner we had some femmynine company—"

Mackson silenced him with a look. Suddenly an exclamation escaped his lips. He fell back a step, turned his head upward. A low, murmuring roar came from the sky.

"It's Pitto!" yelled Stoker.

"And without Tarney!" Mackson ejected tobacco juice with an angry *splat*.

Pitto came down on his feet. His hands fumbled at his helmet. He thrust it back, came running toward the silent group. He stopped, apprehensively.

Mackson rumbled, walking toward him, "Where's Tarney?" Pitto stammered incoherently. "You dumb, damn fool," roared Mackson, "you going to stand there and tell me you lost him?"

Pitto backed up. "I couldn't help it, Mackson," he cried. "He pulled a—"

Mackson reached him. His hairy paw lashed out into Pitto's face. "I could murder you," he growled. "Now Tarney's in the know. He'll be watchin' for us."

Pitto whimpered, "I couldn't help it, I tell you."

"Quiet!"

Mackson's savage expression gave way to one of attention to a far-off sound. His head lifted. Then Tarney heard it. His

face paled. The brief, popping explosion came up through the pass and the tiny echoes died away. Again it sounded.

Mackson straightened, nodded grudgingly at O'Malley. "Looks like you was right. They're up ahead, probably holding off some of them man-eaters. Come on." The third and fourth shot had sounded. Mackson waved his arm all inclusively. He went loping away, his men after him. They disappeared from sight before Tarney left his place of concealment and moved after them, his heart pounding with stifling panic; not for himself, but for the girl. Incredible that he should feel that torturing emotion now. He ground his teeth together, remembering the fear in her eyes only short hours before.

AFTER ten minutes, the sheer escarpments on either side widened. Stretching below lay the valley, yellow with grass, green with occasional groups of trees. Tarney's breath caught in his throat. He saw the hut he and the girl had erected out there, a half mile into the valley; saw her, back to the hut, a tiny figure with the glistening Hampton in her hand. And again the weapon spoke; yet the slavering pack of wolf-like creatures fell back only to circle in from the rear.

Mackson's voice drifted back. "Where the hell's Tarney?" he said blankly.

No one could answer his question. Stoker said suddenly, "Say, this is our chance. We can chase the beasties off, and the girl would probably fall into our arms from sheer relief."

Mackson said slowly, "Not a bad idea, Stoker."

Tarney heard them moving off again, scrambling down the slope to the valley floor. Hovering on the valley rim, he saw them running off through the long grass, Hamptons drawn. In spite of himself, he felt as if a load had been taken off his shoulders. Oh, it was purely a selfish motive that prompted them; but selfish or not, it meant a salvation for the girl that Tarney was unable to give. And if he had his way, the advantage would not be theirs long. His jaw set with grim purpose. He followed after, running at full speed, the wind whipping in his hair.

Mackson and the others pumped their first fire into the drove. Tarney saw Mary whirl, and from this distance even could see the expression of relief on her strained face.

The ghoulish clucking of the beasts turned into a deep-throated, blood-freezing murmur. They retreated to the side of the hut, circling. Mackson waved his men on, and moved steadily forward himself, firing as he went. Tarney smiled grimly; he must have looked an heroic figure to the girl.

He hovered some hundred yards away, flat on his stomach, watching the rout of the beasts. Dispersing them was a fairly simple matter, particularly with half of them either dead or dying. The remnants of them finally turned, and retreated reluctantly across the plain.

Tarney watched sharply. The men crowded around the girl. From her manner, Tarney reasoned that she must be thanking them, stiffly. Good girl! She was being wary now, hardly willing to accept Mackson's favor as an act of friendship. She moved back now, holding the Hampton warily in her small hand. Tarney sensed stalemate. This was not what Mackson had expected, surely. He waited, his own plan forming in his mind, should it become necessary to use one. There was no concealment between here and the camp, and he'd have small chance running that distance without drawing Mackson's attention.

He came to his knees suddenly, lips thinning, gloved hands resting on the rocket-blast stud at the hip of his pressure suit. Mackson had taken a step forward, obviously arguing with the girl. Stoker had edged around to the side. Bramley had disappeared from the girl's sight by slipping around the hut wherein lay Richie. Then, while Mackson argued, they suddenly came up behind her.

The struggle was brief. Bramley and Stoker pinioned her arms, while Mackson relieved her of her weapon. Her face was tense with anger. Her scream came floating down the wind.

"Now!" Tarney whispered to himself. He pressed the stud. Lactescent flames darted from his shoulder jets, impelled him on a low, nicely calculated arc through the hundred yards of air separating him from Mackson. His outstretched hands

grabbed O'Malley by the neck, whipped the man off his feet. His Hampton went flying, as he was flung mercilessly to the ground. Tarney released the stud, fell feet first. The Hampton shone in the sun. He dived for it, only to see it vanish in the puff of an explosion. He whirled, shocked, unbelieving, to see Mackson charging down on him, lips drawn back from his big teeth in a sneer, a curl of gray-blue smoke rising from his Hampton.

TARNEY impelled himself to his feet in time to meet the man's rush. His shoulder caught Mackson full on the chest. Mackson went staggering back, grunting. Tarney threw himself at him, bore Mackson to the ground. Vainly, sharply aware of his desperate position, he struggled for the Hampton. His fist crashed down into Mackson's face. His hand closed around the projector, by sheer brute strength wrested it from the man's hand. He rolled over, and flung himself to his feet in time to see both Stoker and Bramley charging.

This was hopeless. There was no defense against it. He stepped back, lacking even the time to curl his finger around the trigger. He stumbled over Mackson. Went down. The two men hurled themselves on him, and held him to the ground, their breath hot on his face. He stopped struggling, lay there, helpless, cursing himself bitterly. He twisted his head, saw the girl struggling tigerishly against Pitto's wiry strength. He caught her eyes, and slowly shook his head, smiling.

She stopped struggling, her breast rising and falling from the fury of her exertions.

Pitto said, one arm tight around her waist, "That's more like it." He was panting. His eyes switched to Mackson. Mackson was getting to his feet, wiping the blood off his mouth on the back of his hand, staring at it, then wiping his wrist on his grease-stained trousers.

He cast a glance at Tarney, then at the girl. He grinned. "That's that. Thought you had me there for a minute, Tarney. Damnation! That girl of yours is a witch!"

She caught her breath, colored. "I'm not his girl," she said coldly.

"Not *now*. But you was, see? You don't think he'd of risked this if he didn't think you was more than just a female convict from the penal colony on Io. Hell's bells, nine weeks on a prison farm don't make you no convict." He took a single involuntary step toward her, eyes glistening.

She winced.

"What happens now?"

His brows came down in anger. "You know what happens," he said with savagery. "Why play like you don't? There's years ahead of us here. Ahead of you and me, see? Tarney dies, see? No sense letting him hang around to make life miserable for me," he added, almost sullenly. He turned. "Get up, Tarney."

Tarney, released, got up, his face set in cold, harsh lines.

Mackson said, "I got to do this, understand?"

"No, you don't," said a voice. "Furthermore, you ain't goin' to, Mackson. Guess I've got the strength to stand here a while, and chase you buzzards away."

Tarney whirled.

"Richie!" he whispered blankly.

The grizzled old spacer grinned wanly. "Couldn't lay and watch them pull a prize stunt like this, Cap'n." He was leaning against the hut, his Hampton in his hands. An unhealthy, shiny red flush mantled his cheeks, and his eyes were too bright. He grinned twistedly. "Don't you move, Mackson. Don't any of you move."

Mackson said, his voice low with restrained rage, "Put that gun down, you damned old fool."

Richie ignored him.

"Tarney," he said steadily, "step back and take your girl. Pitto, let Mary go. Quick!" His weapon waggled.

Tarney moved backward, grasped the girl's arm.

"Now disarm these buzzards, Cap'n," said Richie. His voice sagged, as if the strength was leaving his body. "Hurry now, boy."

Tarney did his job quickly.

"Now," said Richie, "get going, Cap'n. You heard me, didn't you, Cap'n? Don't worry none about me, understand?" He laughed grimly. "I'm past the dying age anyway, dammit!"

Tarney was held there, rooted, unable to believe that which was indubitably happening. O'Malley, Pitto, Stoker, Bramley, Mackson—caught motionless, facing Richie's steadily held Hampton; and

Richie dying by slow degrees on his feet.

"I can't do it, Richie," he whispered. "It might be the right thing to do, but it's wrong. Wrong!"

AFTERWARD, Tarney realized that that which then happened was incapable of presaging itself.

A meteor does not give forewarning of its approach, for it travels faster than sound.

A ship which has taken up a steadily contracting orbit about a planet—the *Terra,* for example—would have meteoric velocity as it plunged through this shallow atmosphere.

A burst of infernal white light then, catching in the corner of Tarney's eye; something of the truth flicking into his consciousness; then comprehension. One photographic glimpse of Richie's face, pale yet purposeful; of the doomed men who faced him.

Tarney's left arm curled around the girl viciously. The gloved thumb of his right hand depressed the rocket stud at his hip with a single flick. He was conscious of motion, of wind slapping at his exposed face, of the sky rushing down to enclose him in its violet immensity.

Somewhere, far away, the tremendous concussion was born. And far above its source, Tarney, wildly, sickeningly striving to retain consciousness, tossed about as if from the hands of one giant to another. Then that was gone, and they were rushing higher, the world beneath them erupting in heavy, voluminous bursts of sound.

After minutes of this, retaining his balance only by a miracle of adjustment, he caught the girl's eyes on him. She shuddered.

"Don't let go of me," she whispered. She kept her eyes away from the ground.

Momentarily, the panic of incredulity caught hold of Tarney. He had but to open his arms and— His arms contracted desperately, holding her to him. They rocketed along. Tarney bent his sight downward. Dust rolled in yellow clouds across the valley. The valley itself was criss-crossed with gaping cracks, was humped up and churned. Of the men who had been grouped in the valley's center there was no sign. Nor could the *Terra,* that had caused the havoc, be seen. Yet Tarney saw that it had struck the escarpments at the far end of the valley, had caused a whole mountain to slide from its base into the valley. The racking explosion of the Wittenberg disrupters had finished what the falling mountain had not. Richie was gone, dead. A lump caught in his throat.

He landed on a cliff rim overlooking the debacle. He set the girl gently on her feet, and, his arm about her waist, they stood there watching. "And that's that," he muttered.

The sun was leaving the sky.

She said dreamily, "This seems strange, somehow."

He agreed. He knew what she meant. That they could be here and not some place else. On a ship. In a prison farm. It was strange. Involuntarily, he drew her closer.

She added, still dreamily, "No coffee. No tea. No salt. No sugar. No clothes. No nothing."

"There's Mackson's camp, Mary. Remember. He unloaded the ship of all its supplies. All we have to do is to find the camp."

She turned around to meet his glance, her full lips parted, her eyes full of meaning. Tarney drew her to him, placed his lips on hers, and felt the heady, unrestrained fire of her even through the drooping folds of his pressure suit. After a while he released her, shaken.

She smiled tremulously. "We're alone here, Captain Tarney. Alone. There's *nobody.* This world is ours."

"Ours," he repeated, and nodded his head. The Sun went down then, and he stood here looking at her, a quiet smile on his face.

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SPACE-WOLF

By RAY CUMMINGS

The lure of precious zolonite drew Morgan to barren Titan—to find a weird beast-empire ruled by a cold-eyed Earth-girl queen.

SOLO MORGAN laid his small portable spectroscope on the rock and sat down beside it to rest. He was panting, breathless from the climb up to these precipitous heights, even though the gravity here on Titan was less than that of Earth. It was night. The pallid little Sun had swiftly set behind a distant line of

jagged mountain peaks. At the other horizon Saturn was rising, a monstrous glowing ball with a foreshortened segment of the rings spreading in a great iridescent flame of pale prismatic color across half the sky.

From here, Solo Morgan could just see the tiny blob of his one-man space-ship where he had left it down in the hollow. "He travels fastest who travels alone," had always been Solo Morgan's motto. But now at the age of twenty-eight, a big, rangy, handsome fellow with curly, crisp brown hair, it seemed to Morgan that he was somewhat a failure. So far he had failed to strike it rich; and a single big strike had always been what he was after. He set his jaw grimly as he thought of it. Well, now was the time. There was a lode of Zolonite here on this moon of Saturn. The spectroscopic evidence of it had been faint, yet unmistakable. Doubtless it was a single, small concentration; Zolonite perhaps in an almost pure state. Immensely more valuable than radium; more valuable than any other radioactive substance known to earth.

Morgan stood up, rested, to continue his climb. By all that he had been able to determine from the faint spectroscopic bands, and the intensity registers which he had so carefully used in that circling flight around the bleak, uninhabited satellite, the Zolonite deposit must be somewhere in this neighborhood The radiometer had seemed to indicate gathering strength as he climbed. Perhaps it would be beyond this next rise, where now he could see a ragged plateau thick with a lush, fantastic blue-gray vegetation.

He started forward; and suddenly from nearby there was a sharp crack, an explosive report with a stab of yellow-red flame that mingled with the iridescent sheen of Saturn's glow. And there was a ping, a tanging whistle past his head with a thud against one of the nearby rocks where a leaden pellet flattened itself and dropped beside him.

An old-fashioned bullet! Morgan dropped to the rocks, into a shadow from which in a moment he cautiously raised his head. There was nothing to be seen, except that from a distant clump a little spiral of smoke was rising. What in the devil was this? Titan, so far as anyone knew, was uninhabited. For a second it had flashed to Morgan that it might be a band of space-pirates who had followed him here.

But an old-fashioned bullet-projector! Modern space-pirates would laugh at such a thing! They had nothing but the most modern electronic flash-guns, as Morgan himself in several classes could well testify. Explosive bullet-projectors were museum pieces now. Yet here was one on Titan, handled by somebody, trying to drill him!

Thoughts are instant things. Morgan was flat in the rock hollow. And as he cautiously raised his head there came another crack. The bullet thudded into the metal of his tri-cornered hat, knocking it off. Too close for comfort. His flash-cylinder was in his hand. He sent a bolt sizzling against the distant rocks. It hit nothing but the rocks; but now, abruptly to one side of where he had struck, he saw a flutter—a blue-white drape fluttering in the iridescent light. And in the silence there was a frightened, startled cry. A girl's voice! In that second she had dropped back into the rock-clump. But Morgan had seen her; a white-limbed girl clad in blue drapes, with dark hair flowing down over her shoulders.

Amazement was on Morgan's rugged bronzed face. But his grim lips twitched into a vague, startled smile. Holding the metal hat-brim, he raised the hat. A bullet thudded into it. Her aim was certainly too good to trifle with! Cautiously he stared out over the glowing iridescent rocks. There was no sign of movement; no sound save the distant reverberations of the girl's last shot. Morgan quietly discarded his equipment; his cylinders of synthetic food, water, the radiometer and the big insulated leaden cylinder in which he hoped to take home the Zolonite-concentrate. Thus unburdened he hitched himself back into a deeper hollow. Then he stood half erect, with his gun clipped to his belt, tensing his leg muscles for a jump. She might be able to wing him in the air during the arc of his leap, but he doubted it.

There was a rock-ledge some thirty feet away over a little chasm. The crouching Morgan eyed it, took a few running, crouching steps, straightened and leaped. His body sailed in a great flattened arc over the chasm. There was another startled

exclamation from the girl; another explosive report, but the bullet went wide. Morgan, chuckling, landed in a heap on the ledge, behind a little line of intervening rocks. He could stand erect here, unseen by the girl. The line of rocks extended diagonally toward her. Morgan ducked along behind them. He ran perhaps a hundred feet, crouched down again where there was a break in his rocky shield.

HE could see her plainly now. She was a huddled blob with a long-barreled bullet-gun resting in a rock crevice as she peered out at the line of rocks behind which his leap had carried him. He was much nearer to her now; not over twenty feet. And he cautiously peered, more amazed than ever. The pearly, glowing sheen of the Saturn-light glistened on her skin. Her oval face, framed by her flowing black hair, was set and grim, but he could see that it was a beautiful face.

"What the devil," Morgan muttered to himself. He had clipped his gun to his broad leather belt. Still grimly smiling, he picked up a huge chunk of the porous gray-black Titan rock and heaved it. The rock sailed over the girl; fell with a clatter behind her. It made her give another startled cry as she aimed toward the sound.

And simultaneously, Morgan leaped again—with a bound that carried him back over the gully, and landed him almost at the girl's side. She screamed, tried to struggle to her feet, with the gun jerking around. But Morgan gripped the barrel.

"Easy," he murmured. "Don't get excited; I won't hurt you." He thought that his tone, if perhaps not his words, would quiet her. And then she gasped,

"You—you let me alone!"

She spoke English! Morgan was beyond being amazed at anything now. He snatched the rusty old gun from her and tossed it away. She stood docile within his grip, terrified, but defiant. She was younger than he had thought, not over sixteen or seventeen probably. Her single, blue-gray garment, he could see now, was tattered, frayed. It had the look of a fabric fragile with age. It fell from her pink-white shoulders to her thighs. A crudely fashioned animal-skin belt girdled her slender waist. Leather thongs crossed her breast, modeling the dress, and her long black hair lay there in a tangle. Her feet were bare, with toughened soles from long walking on these jagged rocks.

"Let me alone," she was muttering. She stood swaying backward in his grip, her dark eyes watchful, alert. He could not miss now the wildness upon her, a weird mixture of savagery and civilization. She looked as though she were figuring only how she could kill him.

"Well," he said, "I don't get this at all. What's your name?"

"Nada," she gasped.

"Nothing else? You speak English so you're from Earth. Now how in the devil—"

She suddenly twitched away from him, but he caught her and again she stood panting.

"Now listen, take it easy," he said. He drew her down to the rock, and sat beside her, still holding her. "So your name's Nada? Well, Nada, let's talk about this. But first, the main idea is, I'm not going to hurt you, an' I damn' sure won't let you kill me. Get the idea?"

"Yes. I understand."

"Well, in a nutshell, I'm Morgan—Solo Morgan. Here alone. You might want to call me Tom; that was my original name. I'm here looking for a precious metal. I hope I find it, because it'll make me rich back on earth. And the last thing I did expect to find, here on this God-forsaken little satellite, was a pretty girl like you."

It somewhat startled Solo Morgan that his heart seemed beating faster as he stared at her and felt her resisting arms within his grip. An interest in the opposite sex had never been one of his failings. It was completely contrary to his theory that he travels fastest who travels alone.

But this somehow was different, startlingly different. "That's my story," he finished. "Now it's your turn."

Normally, Solo Morgan always had been alert, under all circumstances, to possible danger. But he was absorbed now. He hadn't noticed the faint sound of flapping wings behind him, nor noticed the weird-looking bird-shape which passed over his head, and vanished as it dropped down into a rock-clump a hundred feet away.

But Nada saw it. Her gaze, like the gaze of a trapped animal, was darting around the iridescent darkness. Her hearing, far keener than Morgan's, heard a faint cawing call, as though a parrot were chattering.

She tensed in Morgan's grip. "Stop it," he said. "You can't get away from me. What other name have you got besides Nada?"

"Nada Livingston. I was from Nairobi."

He stared. The name was vaguely familiar. "Dr. Carter Livingston?" he murmured.

"Yes. That was my father."

MORGAN remembered now. He had been a boy of ten or eleven when the name of Dr. Carter Livingston had been notorious all over the world. He was a cracked old scientist living in East Africa. As Morgan remembered it, Carter Livingston had had some theory that the wild animals of earth should be protected from the cruelty of man. He wanted laws that no animals should be hunted. Then he had gone to Africa, with new theories that animals were only different forms of humans; undeveloped, untaught, but with a latent ability for learning which no human had yet recognized. Then there were rumors that in the African jungle, Carter Livingston and his young wife had established a trained-animal zoo. Wild tales. Parrots, with their pseudo-human vocal cords, not only chattering English words, but putting a childish but human intelligence into them. Apes that could mouth human words, and think human thoughts. Then Livingston's wife had died, leaving him an infant daughter. There had been some incidents of violence—Livingston's trained apes accused of raiding a nearby Masai village, and killing some of the black children whose fathers had been hunting wild animals in the neighborhood. Livingston had denied the thing as fantastic. But the British authorities had descended upon his animal-colony and cleaned it out. In a rage, Livingston, with his infant daughter, had disappeared.

Morgan had been murmuring the story. "That was your father?" he said.

"Yes. We came here. He died just a little while ago."

Morgan drew in his breath. "And now you're living alone here on Titan?"

"Alone? Why—"

He heard the flapping wings this time. Startled, his hands dropped from the girl's shoulders as he turned around. A great birdlike shape was fluttering past overhead; a blue thing like a big flamingo. A grotesque bird. Its body seemed feathered, but its huge wings were naked membrane, pointed like a bat's. Its head was round, with a little glistening skull and a great hawked nose.

"Caw — caw — coming, Nada—coming, Nada."

In that second Morgan sucked in his breath at the gruesome, chattering cry. Just a monstrous parrot? It seemed more than that. It darted down, swooping on as though it were about to attack. Then it suddenly darted up, dropped back of a nearby rock.

"Coming—help—Nada—"

Its eerie cackled words still sounded. Morgan had snatched out his flash gun. Nada was clutching at him now.

"Don't!" she murmured. "That's my friend. You—you must not."

Hairy shapes abruptly were materializing from the rocks behind Morgan. He heard a low whining bark; whirled to see a monstrous, shaggy, red-haired animal coming at him. It suggested an ape, yet was unlike one. A large body on two long shaggy legs, with long, dangling arms. A bushy tail, wildly swishing. A round head, with the shaggy red hair dangling over its face where eyes were shining and a mouth was growling.

Morgan's gun flashed. But with a cry Nada had knocked up his arm. The bolt went sizzling into the air, with its tiny crack of thunder rolling in muffled reverberations out through the shining night. He had no chance to fire again. The shaggy, oncoming thing pounced. Morgan was aware only that behind it there were others like it. The shaggy body knocked him backward. From its padded paws, fingers like claws came out—bluish fingers like the hands of an ape, clutching at his throat, strangling him. Then he heard the whizz of a thrown chunk of rock. It cracked on his skull so that all the shining darkness burst into a roaring glare of light in his head. Then the light

swiftly faded as he sank into the soundless abyss of unconsciousness.

"YOU'RE better now?"

He was vaguely aware that cool water was running down his face from his hair and that Nada's voice was softly murmuring to him.

"You are better now? Don't die. Tamo is sorry that he hit you."

His eyelids had fluttered up. He knew now that she was sponging a wound in his scalp. And all he could see was a blurred interior, and the blurred blob of Nada bending over him. Then her outline clarified. He was lying on something soft, and she was sitting beside him.

"All right," he murmured. He grinned. "That was some crack somebody or something gave me."

Her face lighted with relief. "One of my goths," she said. "He's sorry. . . . No, you lie quiet now." He was trying to struggle up on one elbow, but she shoved him back. Beside him there was a cracked old china wash basin. The water in it with which she was sponging his head was red with his blood.

"Guess I'm all right now," he muttered. His hand went to his belt. His gun was gone.

"Just lie quiet. You'll be all right in a few minutes."

He was weak and dizzy; his body bathed in cold sweat. For another minute he closed his eyes and she went on silently sponging his head. He remembered now, vaguely, that he had been conscious enough to realize that he had been dragged here by the weird red-haired animals. It had evidently not been far. Dimly he seemed to recall that they had plunged underground, where there were phosphorescent rocks to light up the subterranean passages with an eerie glow.

He opened his eyes again. He could see that phosphorescent glow through the window-openings here. He was in a room—a little grotto with tattered, faded fabric drapes on its walls, a rug on its floor. And two or three pieces of weird-looking, old-fashioned earth-style furniture.

Presently he was sitting up. "I'm all right," he declared. "Thanks, Nada." His hand went to his head. "I guess it's stopped bleeding."

"Yes. I think so." She was gazing at him with interest now, and Morgan realized he was the only man she had ever seen, except her father. Her bosom rose and fell under the bodice of her tattered dress with her emotion.

Morgan understood that faded, old-fashioned earth-dress now. They had been her mother's clothes. And he understood the furnishings. He saw now that a bookcase in a corner of the cave-room contained half a dozen shelves of books. And on a rickety table stood a small portable sewing machine; a hoop with embroidery; needles and thread and a garment in process of mending.

Her little world. Solo Morgan gazed around him, from where he lay on a camp cot, and was astonished at the thoughts he was thinking and the emotion he was feeling.

"Tell me about yourself," he said gently. "This is your home, eh?"

"Yes," she agreed. She told him how her father had brought her up here, how he had taught her from the books which he had brought with them.

Queer that there on this moon of Saturn, the wandering, embittered Carter Livingston had found no humans, but an animal, bird and insect life. Yet it was no coincidence, for Livingston had journeyed until he found what he wanted. Himself an educated human, he would give the animals the advantages he had had through the centuries of human advancement. Breed God's creatures upward, some day perhaps to reach the intelligence of man.

Morgan stared at the girl as she so earnestly described it. Rot, of course. And yet that flying, flamingo-like thing had certainly talked, and talked much more intelligently than any parrot. It had called for help, and the red-haired ape things had come on the run. Morgan grimaced with the memory. One of those round-headed goths had throttled him with its ape-like hands, while another of them cracked him on the head with a rock. He gazed around the room uneasily now, but none of them was in sight.

"Can those goths talk, too?" he demanded.

"Yes. A little, but it's hard to understand. A growling mumble. But they're

very intelligent. You see, their life-span is nearly ten years, so we only have a few generations that father taught. He said that with use, the vocal cords and the larynx were getting more adapted. Tamo is my best one. And he makes the others understand. They're very gentle."

"With you," Morgan supplemented wryly.

"Yes. Cah called them for help."

"Cah? You mean that big bird?"

"Yes. Father bred six generations of his family. And nature made his talking apparatus very adequate for human words."

"No argument on that," Morgan agreed. He was gazing through the glowing window-opening of the cave-room. There was vegetation outside. It was like a great lush subterranean forest. Gnarled, fantastic-shaped trees with bluish vines lacing them together. Huge pods hung on them, and monstrous pallid flowers that opened and closed their petals rhythmically as though breathing.

GRUESOME damn things. Morgan was about to ask if what looked like vegetation here might not be more animal than vegetable, when suddenly his attention was caught by a little round red thing that was on the ledge of the rocky window-opening. It was no bigger than the end of his finger—a round, glistening, red-shelled thing with jointed legs protruding from it. Tiny antenna were weaving in front of its single eye, which seemed glaring at him balefully.

He made a startled gesture. "What the devil is that?" he demanded.

Nada smiled. "One of our insects. Father used to call them rollers. He said on earth you'd consider them of the ant family. They're remarkable little things. Well, I guess you'd say that about earth ants, too, wouldn't you? Terribly strong for their size, with a nasty bite. They build their own houses. They're highly organized, with workers and leaders, and their own armies."

"And you can talk to them, too?" Morgan muttered.

"Well, no," she said. "Not exactly. But Cah seems to be able to make them understand."

The little red-shelled, ball-like thing on the window ledge suddenly hitched out a leg and rolled itself backward; then picked itself up and scurried away like a tiny round crab.

"Well," Morgan said, "your father's theories, here on Titan—"

A sudden distant growl made him check himself. It was outside; muttered growls, growing louder. He stared inquiringly at Nada.

"The goths," she murmured. "Something wrong?"

They came in a moment; two of the weird, round-headed animals, dragging something between them. In the background a pack of the others lurked, shaggy red blobs half hidden by the fantastic tangle of vines, their peering eyes like little lanterns among the foliage and the pallid flowers.

It was a dead goth which was being dragged here to Nada. With Morgan after her, she ran outside. The huge dead goth lay crumpled. Its companions were mumbling at Nada. Queer form of speech, half animal, half human, so that the mouthed, snarled words of anger now, to Morgan, seemed almost but not quite intelligible.

"What happened?" he demanded.

The dead goth's face was leprous. Burned into a noisome, pulpy mass as though by a flash bolt.

"They found him, lying like that," Nada said. Terror was on her face. "Something—someone with a strange gun of lightning, like the one I took from you."

It was dawning on Morgan. Then a flapping of wings sounded. "Coming, Nada. Cah comes."

The beaked-nosed, feathered shape of Cah came fluttering; landed by Nada. Weird chattering bird. "Cah saw it, Nada. Men like this one. Out beyond the tunnels, they killed Tagaro. Cah saw them. Cah sees everything—"

It fluttered away, excited, like an imbecilic child, chattering with its excitement.

Space-pirates! Prowling here, looking for the Zolonite. Doubtless they had seen Morgan's little space-ship; knew he was here, and were looking for him.

"They were outside?" Morgan demanded swiftly. "Out near where I found you? Is that what the parrot-thing tried to say?"

"Yes," she gasped. "Oh, who could it be? Other earthmen here? You—you said you came alone."

"I did. But I can make a pretty darn good guess who it is all right. Nada, listen!"

The ring of goths here were all eyeing Morgan suspiciously with weird, baleful eyes set in wrinkled, bluish, apelike faces.

"Tell them I didn't do it," Morgan said hastily. "Tell them bad men did it, if they can manage to understand that much from you."

Would the damned growling things jump on him now? "Listen," he added swiftly to the girl. "That's a band of earthmen—space-pirates. They're here to try and steal the Zolonite I came after. Nada, where's that gun of mine you took away from me?"

"What—what are you going to do?" she stammered.

His eyes hardened.

"I don't want them to find you. Understand that!"

Morgan knew perfectly well what he was going to try to do—get the girl out of here, into his space-ship. Zolonite or not, he had no intention of trying to fight the space-pirates with this girl as the stake for success or victory.

"Get that gun of mine," he commanded. "Hurry it now."

THE girl ran into the cave-room; came back with it. She was trembling; white-faced. "Will—will they really kill you?"

"I hope not," Morgan said grimly. "We're not going to stick around here and let them try it. Nada, listen: you show me the way into those tunnels. Tell the goths to stay here, as they'll only complicate things."

The goths were sullenly watching, listening. At Nada's vehement command they slunk back, but they still watched Morgan suspiciously.

"Into the tunnels?" she stammered. "But why?"

He seized her arm.

"Yes. Come on." No use telling her that he was going to get her back to earth. She might put up an argument at leaving her animals. He ran with her, through the little cave-room, into a dim, glowing tunnel.

"This was the way you brought me in, wasn't it?" he presently demanded as they ran.

She nodded.

"Yes. The outer surface, not so far ahead."

Good enough. He'd slam her into the ship and tell her what it was all about afterward. The tunnel was dark, with just a faint eerie glow of phosphorescence that seemed inherent to the rocks themselves. It was a narrow passage, seeming to wind upward. At intervals, other little corridors crossed it. Occasionally it widened into grottos. They came to a large one with a jagged rocky floor, broken, rocky walls.

Here they halted.

"Not so far now," Nada was saying. Her face in the dimness was turned toward Morgan, and she was trying to smile—a frightened, puzzled smile. And suddenly he sucked in his breath. Her teeth were shining with blue-green iridescence; luminous with a blue-green light streaming from them! Radioactive, stroboscopic light! The treasure of Zolonite he had come here to find. It must be here close at hand!

Morgan gripped the girl and stood still, peering around.

"What is it?" she murmured with new terror.

"Wait! I'm looking around for something."

And then he saw it. Zolonite in almost its pure state. The vein of its out-cropping was a crescent curve diagonally up the wall; and beneath it, shining chunks had crumbled and were lying strewn. Swiftly Morgan stooped, gathered up handfuls, stuffed them into his pockets. Samples, and then he would bring back a mining crew to open this up. And even the samples would be worth a sizable fortune. But the space-pirates wanted this, too.

Solo Morgan, at that instant, was not quite clear in his mind what he would try to do. But the feel of the girl's pliant waist within his arm as they ran, decided him. She was certainly more important than the Zolonite.

"I'm taking you to my ship," he mur-

mured suddenly. "Don't bother to put up any argument now. That's where you're going."

He saw her turn and stare at him. They had come abruptly to the end of the tunnel; the sheen of Saturn-light was on her face, shining in her misted eyes as she regarded him.

"Taking me to earth?" she said uncertainly.

"I sure am. You can't live out your life here, just for a bunch of weird animals."

"But some time you'd bring me back?" she murmured tremulously.

"Sure I would. Got to come anyway to mine the Zolonite."

Here was the clump of rocks where he had been when first he saw Nada. His leaden cylinder was lying here. He stuffed the Zolonite samples carefully into it. Sealed it.

"Now we go down the mountain, Nada, to my ship down there."

A sizzling flash with a tiny crack of thunder interrupted him. The bolt from nearby sizzled over their heads as Morgan, with a sweep of his arm, knocked the girl to the ground and flung himself beside her.

"That's them," he muttered grimly. "Keep down, Nada."

Another bolt cracked with a prismatic shower of sparks on the rocks in front of them. Morgan and the girl were lying in a little depression now, protected by a broken line of rocks with a cliff close behind them. He could see where the pirates were gathered, at the bottom of a small gully some fifty feet away. And then in the silence, an ironic chuckling voice floated over.

"Got you, Morgan. No use putting up a fight. Toss out your gun an' we won't kill you."

Morgan, watchful for the chance to drill one of them if he showed himself, lay quiet with the huddled girl trembling beside him.

"Got your wife with you?" the voice drawled. "That who it is? Come on out and let's have a look at her. We won't hurt her." There was a burst of raucous laughter from the other pirates.

Morgan did not reply. His brain was busy trying to find an out.

MORGAN could see that there was no chance for him and the girl to move from where they were lying. He had chanced a leap from here against Nada's old-fashioned explosive-gun with its single small bullet, but he couldn't take such a chance against modern bolt-weapons. The least move would expose them in the full sheen of Saturn-light.

They lay still.

"So you just want to stay where you are?" the voice called. "Okay, we'll get you."

They were invisible; but back down the distant little gully Morgan suddenly saw the blob of a creeping figure; one of the pirates trying to get to where he could chance a leap. Morgan tensed; raised his gun. The shadowed blob moved again; straightened a little. Morgan's flash spat its bolt. A scream mingled with the tiny thundercrack, and the blob leaped into the air, turned over and crashed down again, inert upon the rocks.

It brought a fusillade of shots; but they splattered harmlessly with a great shower of sparks on the blackened rocks. And suddenly the trembling girl gripped Morgan.

"Look! Cah is flying over there." She pointed.

There was a flapping of wings in the Saturn-light. And the bird's eerie, cawing, chattering voice. "Cah sees them. There they are!"

The excited bird's fluttering shape was visible. "Cah sees them! Cah sees everything!" it chattered.

A bolt from one of the pirates mingled with its cries. The flash shot up. The huge bird, its weirdly childish voice stilled forever, came wavering down, turning end over end until it thudded heavily on the rocks.

"Oh poor Cah," Nada murmured. Then she gasped: "Oh look! There by the little gully."

The rocks on the upper lip of the small gully where the crouching pirates were gathered were splashed pale-white by the Saturn-light. And in the glow there now, a thin little red line was visible. A moving line. It stretched back over the rocks, down into another hollow and up again. Morgan caught his breath as he stared. It was a line of tiny, moving red figures.

Myriads of them; round things small as the end of his finger.

The rolling, red ants. They came hitching themselves, scuttling; a vast little army. And then he saw other lines of them converging on the gully; marching grimly, silently to battle, summoned perhaps by Cah's excited calls.

Breathlessly Morgan and the girl watched. The pirates undoubtedly didn't notice the marching red hordes of tiny insects behind them. A dozen thin red moving lines now. Silently but inexorably they crawled over the rocks, down into the gully.

Then there was a startled cry. "What in hell!" And one of the pirates incautiously straightened, his arms flailing wildly, his hands plucking at his clothing, at his face.

Morgan raised his gun, but Nada shoved it down. "No need," she murmured. "The bites of those red ants are quite poisonous."

Silently then, they stood and watched the strange battle.

It was a ghastly attack. Within a minute the space-pirates were screaming, staggering. Half a dozen of their frenzied bolts went wild into the air. And then they had flung their guns away, frenzied, demoniac as they fought the swarming, viciously biting little insects crawling upon them. There were four of the men. Morgan could have shot them all as they staggered out into the open, but there was no need. In another minute they were rolling in agony on the ground, with yet more thin red lines converging upon them. And then at last their blood-chilling screams were silent. In the Saturn-light they lay motionless, red with their blood and red with the swarming hordes that crawled over them.

Morgan was standing now, with the horrified, shuddering girl trembling against him. The lead cylinder with its treasure of Zolonite was clipped to his belt. But with his arm around Nada he knew that she was the real treasure he had found upon Titan. He held her closer. Nobody would ever be able to call him Solo Morgan again.

PS's Feature Flash

FLASHING you the highlights on one of the men you've met in the preceding pages—those cosmic-minded writers who help to nourish Planet Stories.

We liked "Invaders of the Forbidden Moon" so much, we thought it might be interesting to tackle Mr. Gallun for a short biography and a line or two on how he happened to hit upon his novel plot. Mr. Gallun crashed through beautifully with the following account of what makes him and his stories tick:

"Quite a few years ago a high school junior in Beaver Dam, Wisconsin, wrote a science-fiction story for English comp. The story was the *Crystal Ray*. It sold for twenty-five bucks, lifted the writer's ego into the rosy clouds, and started a habit which has given me plenty of ups and downs and pains in the neck, pulled me through the worst part of the depression, plus a period of ill-health, and has provided me with the freedom to visit some twenty of the United States, plus eleven foreign countries. It's been worth it, I guess.

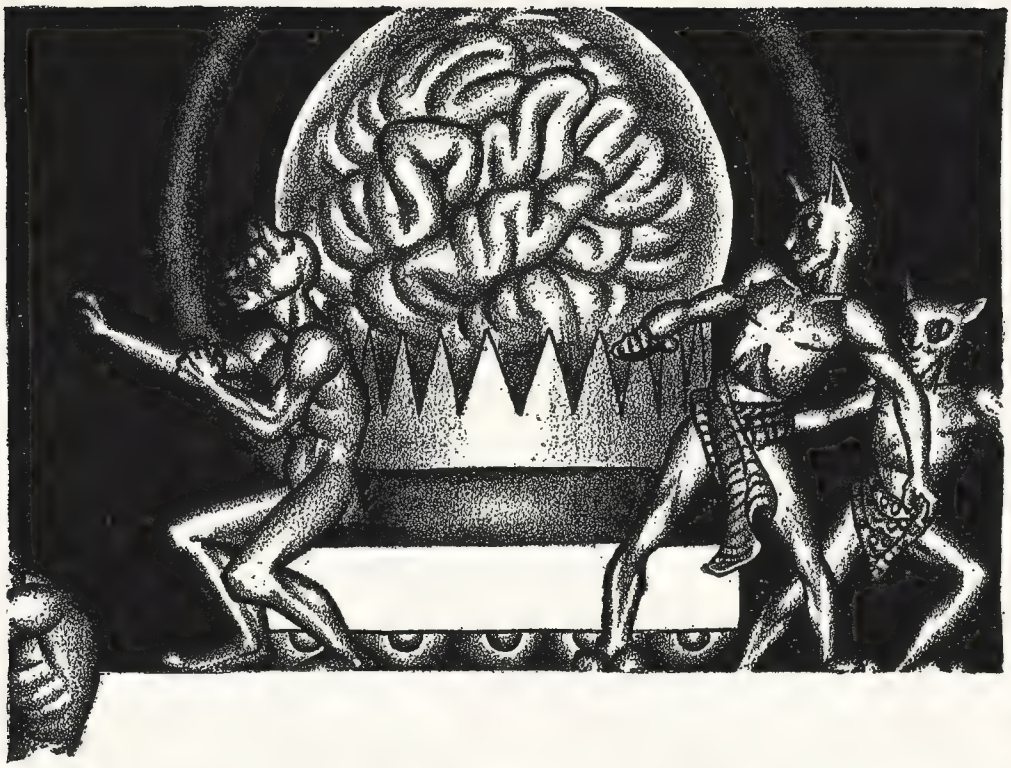
"My background is essentially Mid-West farm, glossed over, during those early years, with a lot of H. G. Wells, H. Rider Haggard, Jules Verne, Kipling, Edgar Rice Burroughs, and the rest of them. Acquantance with the people and places those boys wrote about made my childhood rather off-trail. Thus, when I should have been playing prosaic baseball with the rest of the kids, I was trying to learn Egyptian hieroglyphics, was building mud temples to Osiris in the neighbor's marsh, or was out in the woods bellowing from the treetops, Tarzan fashion.

"A few words about the 'Invaders of the Forbidden Moon.' The story is an attempt to trace the future of science to its ultimate possibilities, and to point out some of the dangers that might turn up. Pure, physical science is one thing. Its relation to man, or to intelligences of any kind, whatever form they may take, is another. People must learn to adjust themselves to this future growth of science, which can benefit mankind, but which might very possibly ruin it, if an existing trend were carried too far. Ease and comfort provided by mechanical devices are nice things to have; but if psychologists are right, struggle of some kind is needed, too, otherwise weakness develops.

"Thus, there should always be new horizons. Perhaps science will constantly reveal them, always providing something to test human wits and energies. Maybe science will lead to a dead end of stagnation, where everything has been learned. Maybe evolution will produce a mental superman, who will know far better than we do how to limit supermachines, how to control himself, and how to handle coming trends. No one can say for sure what will happen.

"I try always to do a good job of work. There is nothing new in my hope that you will like the story.

"RAYMOND Z. GALLUN."



Proktols of Neptune

By HENRY HASSE

Space-rumor had spun wild tales of horror about Neptune's almost-legendary race of Proktols. But what could rumor know of this hideous reality that faced Space-captain Janus and his captive crew!

COMMANDER JANUS stared in bafflement at the power-board of the Patrol ship *Wasp*. The Deflector needle was still gyrating wildly. That had begun five minutes ago. His lips tightened, and he looked up irritably as the First Mate peered inquisitively over his shoulder.

"Better check up on the course again, Devries!"

"Just did, sir. We're point oh-oh perfect, not the slightest aberrancy."

Janus swore under his breath. "I just can't figure it! Must be some object dead ahead to cause this disturbance, but why doesn't our Deflector beam shunt it from us or pivot us around it?"

He paced the Control room, stopped and looked over at Ketrik whose eyes were fixed steadily on the visipanel. "See anything yet?"

Ketrik merely shook his head, not looking up. That panel magnified their course several times, and Ketrik had the sharpest eyes in the Patrol.

"Damned if I like it a bit," Janus muttered, staring again at the crazy needle that seemed about to jump its bearings. "Devries, tell Blake to cut all jets. We'd better go into a drift until we are a little

better able to determine what's wrong."

Devries stepped to the tube and gave the order to Blake in the rocket room. A moment later the *Wasp* was in the drift. Blake came forward to see what was up. Far behind rolled the hideous green ball that was Neptune, and immeasurably far ahead somewhere was Pluto. Devries stepped again to the chart and saw that the hair-line indicator still had Pluto right on the nose.

"I think I've got something," Ketrik spoke from the panel. The men crowded around him, peering into the square of blackness that seemed to swim as Ketrik turned the magnifying dial.

"I see it!" Blake exclaimed. "Something . . . a meteor? Looks like it's drifting right at us."

But Ketrik shook his head, and his eyes narrowed. "That looks to me like a derelict, and its my opinion that *we're* drifting at it."

"A spacer?" Commander Janus asked excitedly. "Can you make it out, Ketrik? Maybe it's Perrin! I hope to God it is, it'll save us days!"

But the next few minutes revealed that it wasn't Perrin's pirate ship. The drifting spacer was much larger, and of different design, with no name or emblem of any kind. And it was solid black, preventing easy detection against the blackness of space.

"It's a derelict all right," Devries said. "See that ragged gap in the hull near the stern?" He pointed and the others crowded around to look. He was right. In the side of the hull near the stern was a great jagged hole, that looked as though it had been made either by collision with a rogue meteor, or the blast of a space cannon.

They watched in silence as the strange craft drifted toward them. There was no sign of life aboard her; no attempts at communication or of establishing her identity. Quite obviously the craft was deserted.

Devries didn't like the looks of it one bit, and said so.

It loomed up larger and larger as the tiny *Wasp* was drawn swiftly to it. Then with a little shock the *Wasp* clanged against the strange ship's side and clung there.

The crew moved for the space-suits. Commander Janus snapped: "Wait a minute!" He stood there frowning, his gray hair bristling. "Something funny here. We'd better go slow." His eyes were troubled.

"But a derelict, sir," Blake said. "Space code says we're obliged to board her, examine her log."

"Don't quote me the space code!" Janus snapped. "Point is, is she a derelict? Maybe you failed to notice we didn't drift to her by natural attraction; we were pulled! Someone left on her magniplates. Why?"

"Could have been an accident." Blake suggested.

Janus shook his head. "Another thing. Her outer lock is open and we landed smack against it. All we've got to do is step over. How extraordinarily convenient."

Ketrik peered through the turret at the black derelict. "Say, you're right!" He grinned, started to quote an ancient nursery rhyme: "Walk into my parlor, said the spider—"

He stopped suddenly, aware of young Ross standing there with eyes aglow and eager. Ross was the novice member. The *space-ennui* had begun to get to him, so Janus had ordered him to his cabin to sleep it off. Once the *ennui* gets a grip on a man in the vast outer spaces he's not much good for anything, even though he might be a good spaceman in the inner planets.

Now Janus made up his mind, turned to him. "Ross, we're going across. You stand by the controls. Keep your eyes open, and your hand on the portable atom-blast."

Ross showed his disappointment, but obeyed orders.

"My hunch may be wrong," Janus warned, "but we'd better be careful anyway."

The men didn't need his admonition. As they passed out of the *Wasp's* lock and into the other, their hands all hovered around their atom-blasts. And the moment they stepped into the alien spacer they knew Janus' hunch hadn't been wrong. Looking down a long empty corridor, they saw a barred door; beyond that door was the stern compartment

where the gap was in the metal hull.

But the rest of the spacer was still airtight.

Janus flashed them a look that said, "See?" They threw back their helmets. Soundlessly they walked toward the bow, listening intently for any sign of life. They passed some narrow cross-corridors and many doors, all tightly closed. Devries, bringing up the rear, glanced behind him occasionally. Nothing. Nevertheless he shivered. There was a jittery tension in the very air.

They came in sight of the navigation room, and stopped suddenly. Janus stared at the odd looking controls. "I never saw a spacer like this before!" he whispered.

THE voice behind him didn't whisper, it rang hollowly down the long corridor.

"No, I am sure you did not. Do not go any farther, please."

The four men whirled.

It was a mystery where they came from, those dozen fantastic beings behind them. They had heard no steps, no sound of a door opening.

Devries was nearest. His first startled impression was that they weren't more than semi-human: as tall as a man, but much thinner, with flexible wiry limbs. Absurdly large heads, quite hairless and glistening, from which protruded frail antennae. Eyes huge, lidless and staring. No perceptible noses. Mouths but thin gashes. Most striking of all, their entire skin shimmered with a metallic reddish-brown lustre; although the Earthmen learned later it was not metallic, but shell-like.

Ketrik was always reckless. His hand flew to his atom-blast. Much faster, the nearest of the creatures raised a flame pistol. The charge passed so close to Ketrik's body it scorched his suit. Ketrik changed his mind, and the creature said: "That is better."

"Take it easy," Janus warned, still whispering. "We're in their trap now."

The creatures had keen hearing. "Indeed you are, Commander Janus," said the one with the flame-pistol, apparently the leader. "And it was so simple it was almost childish. But you Earthmen are always so noble, with what you call a space code; always ready to go to the aid of a helpless derelict. Or is it merely curiosity? The Martians are not so stupid, they never go prying."

The insult was lost on Janus, who stared. "How do you know my name?" he demanded.

The creature spoke perfect English, but the voice was toneless and the words precise, clipped: "That does not matter. It is my business to know certain things."

"Well, I'm sorry to say I don't know as much about you!" Janus eyed the flame-pistol angrily. "Kindly state your business with us. We're from the Earth Patrol, on official—"

"Yes, I know. In search of one of your race, a pirate, one whom you call Perrin. I have heard of this Perrin." The creature's facial expression didn't change, but the wide blackness of his staring eyes turned to a momentary angry orange, then back to black. He went on in his cold voice:

"I have not introduced myself. I am known as V'Naric. If you wish to know more about us I think your friend there can tell you. It would be amusing to hear about us from his lips." The men were amazed as the creature gestured toward Devries with the pistol. Again the eyes changed color, this time to a soft green which must have signified amusement.

Had the creature read Devries's mind? Yes, he knew them, or rather he'd heard something about them; this was the first one he'd actually seen.

"We're in a spot now," he said in a low tone to his friends. "Those are the Proktols, inhabitants of the single moon of Neptune! They usually stick pretty close to home, but once they go on the warpath, or rather the space-path, you can bet something's up."

"Yes, yes, go on," said V'Naric in his clipped voice, his eyes still green with amusement.

But at that moment the men heard the inner-lock clang shut, and a sudden roar of the rockets. Too late, they realized V'Naric had held their attention with conversation while a few of his men sneaked off to get the spacer under way.

They leaped to the ports and saw the *Wasp* drifting free. They saw something else. A flame leaped from this ship,

touched the *Wasp* and lingered there. A circular spot on its silvery hull glowed suddenly red. Ross was frantically trying to swing the *Wasp* away.

"Good Lord! Ross!" Janus sprang toward V'Naric and clutched at him. "Stop it! One of our men is still aboard back there!"

V'Naric deliberately turned his back.

They saw the thin shell of the *Wasp* burst outward.

"You murdering devils!" yelled Ketrik, suddenly berserk. He leaped toward V'Naric in blind fury, reaching out with his hands.

V'Naric stepped aside, brought up his flame-pistol and calmly crashed the butt of it down upon Ketrik's head. Ketrik crumpled.

V'Naric turned to Devries casually, his eyes now black and placid. "You were saying?"

Devries went numb. He could only barely feel Blake's and Janus' hands restraining him as he tried to leap forward. But his brain was a searing thing of fire. "I was saying you're a blight on the universe, you damned unholy devils!" he shrieked. "You scum, you spawn of hell, you're unfit to inhabit the same space with decent men! I know what you do! I've heard all about you! If I ever get back to Earth I'll bring men out here to blast your filthy planet from the skies!" He shrieked other things, shrieked 'til his throat was raw.

When the red mist cleared from before Devries' eyes he saw V'Naric standing there complacently with his men around him. V'Naric opened his gash of a mouth. He uttered four sentences in that emotionless, precise English:

"I am really disappointed. You do not half do us justice. We are actually much worse than you paint us. I think you will soon have occasion to realize that."

He turned and gestured to his men. They came forward, wrapped their wiry arms around the Earthmen and hustled them down a narrow corridor. They thrust them in an empty room, but kept their atom-blasts, which they examined curiously. They dumped the unconscious Ketrik in on the floor.

The door clanged shut. The Earthmen felt a faint vibration in the bare metal walls as rockets thundered, sending the alien spacer surging ahead.

THEY managed to revive Ketrik after a while. Then they all looked questioningly at Devries.

Devries sank down on the floor, bowed his head in his hands and groaned. "Lord, what a spot to be in! I guess I let loose with some utter gibberish out there. I don't remember all that I yelled. But you wouldn't blame me if you knew what we're probably in for."

"I could make a good guess," Blake said, grinning wryly.

"No, you couldn't," Devries said, so solemnly that Blake's grin vanished. "Commander Janus, I noticed you made a wide sweep away from Neptune. I'll bet you've had orders to stay clear of there. Am I right?"

Janus nodded affirmatively, startled.

"I thought so. And didn't you wonder why?"

"It's not for me to wonder," replied Janus. "There are standing orders that Neptune's utterly unfit, uninhabitable, no reason to land there."

Devries nodded grimly. "All right, and now I'll tell you something. Neptune's *not* uninhabitable. At least its moon is not, for these Proktols live there, and where they can live Earthmen can live. But spacemen usually give Neptune a wide beam, at least those who have heard the rumor. I first heard it in a spacerfront dive on Mars, a few years ago, from a drunken half-breed Martian. He and two companions had been inward-bound from Pluto. They set down on Neptune's moon for a rocket repair. The Proktols got them and hauled them off to their capitol-city. There, before a vast populace, they tortured two of the men horribly. The third Martian managed to escape to his ship, and made it back to Mars alone."

Blake was aghast. "These Proktols did that? These—these things that have got us now?"

"Yes," Devries nodded.

"But why?"

"I don't know. The Martian who told me this didn't seem to know himself."

"Bunk!" Janus pronounced. "No one tortures men without any reason; not even these Proktols."

"But maybe they do have a reason!" Devries replied. "Oh, I'll admit, at first I didn't believe that Martian's story myself. I thought it was the effect of the *tsith* he was drinking, and God knows he needed it, poor devil. But when I looked in his eyes they weren't the kind of eyes I'd ever seen in a Martian or anyone else. They were mad eyes, mad with the sight they had looked upon."

"You said there were rumors," Ketrik spoke up. "I've never even heard of these Proktols before, much less any rumors about 'em."

Devries looked at Ketrik. "I told you they stayed close to home. But you know how many men from the inner planets have come out here, never to be heard of again. After that Martian's story, I made inquiries; mostly from hardened, independent spacemen. I went about the lowest dives of Mars, whispering surreptitiously about 'Proktols.' Out of a hundred I approached, only three men seemed to know what I was talking about. And two of these turned a funny color, and muttered something, and hurried away from me. Their silence was the best eloquence. The third man told me a vague, similar story to that of the Martian's."

"This torture the Proktols seem so fond of," Ketrik sneered. "Tell us about that."

"Well, it's—" Devries tried to tell them but he couldn't. That mad Martian had painted him a picture that rose up now in his brain and flooded it wtih horror. He was suddenly sick, he couldn't speak and he wished he couldn't think. He simply rolled over and lay there with his face to the wall.

The others were suddenly silent.

Blake spoke a minute later. His voice didn't sound the same. "I wonder where they're taking us?"

"There's your answer," Janus replied from the port where he was standing. "I can see Neptune almost dead ahead from here. And it's growing larger."

HOURS later V'Naric came in, bringing them a pasty kind of food that didn't taste too bad. Apparently nonchalant, but very watchful, he stood just inside the door while they ate.

Devries watched him in turn. Already he had learned much just by observing V'Naric's eyes, apparently the Proktols' only medium of emotion. Black—as his were now—meant calm, orange meant anger, and green meant amusement.

When they had finished eating, V'Naric started to leave without a word. Devries stopped him.

"Would you mind telling us, now, where you're taking us and why?" he asked, careful not to lose his temper again. He figured it would do no harm, and might do infinite good, to learn as much as possible.

V'Naric hesitated, surveying him musingly. Then he answered indirectly: "Have you Earthmen ever heard of the sacred temple of Dhovril, or of the Shining Stone?"

No, the Earthmen had never heard of either. "Dhovril," Devries repeated, "that is your planet?"

"Yes."

"And this Shining Stone?"

V'Naric's eyes became green-tinged, and Devries wondered why. "The Shining Stone is merely a colorful meteoric fragment. Many years ago it came flashing through space and landed on Dhovril. The inhabitants there are semi-savage, and worship it, believing it a present from the gods. Of course to such as we"—he apparently meant himself and his companions —"the Shining Stone means nothing, but the others are roused to a fanatical fury when it is touched. And when it is stolen. . . ."

"So you think we stole it!" Janus said. "We never set foot on your planet!"

V'Naric turned complacent black eyes upon him. "No, Commander, I did not say that. Because I know you did not steal it."

"Then why are you holding us?"

"You will see soon."

Ketrik, remembering that blow on the head, was regarding V'Naric balefully. And V'Naric was standing fairly close to him. Now Ketrik didn't move, merely turned his head and spat contemptuously in the Proktol's face.

V'Naric's hand leaped to his belt, like a whip lash, and snatched out the flame-pistol. He pressed it hard against Ketrik's body before any of the men could move. The swift flood of the angry orange filled his eyes.

But he didn't press the button. The orange slowly faded and gave way to a deep purple, as though he were remembering something, then it too faded. He jammed the pistol back in his belt, brought up his hand and slapped Ketrik sharply across the mouth. Those fingers were long and wiry and shell-like; they left four furrows in Ketrik's cheek from which blood oozed. But he stood there stolidly, regarding V'Naric with contempt. V'Naric turned abruptly and left the room.

"You damned fool!" Devries snapped. "Why did you do that?"

"I don't like him," was all Ketrik said, as he slowly raised his hand to his cheek.

"Oh, you don't! Well, he's not exactly in love with you now! He would have blasted you then, but he's got something else up his sleeve. I'd hate to be in your shoes."

Janus said: "We'd all hate to be in our shoes, but it looks like we are. I don't like this Shining Stone business. Must be a pretty important fetish on their world, eh?"

Blake muttered: "If it was stolen, I'll bet I know who got it. That damned pirate, Perrin! You know we had information he was out this way."

Devries said: "No. I think there's something else behind all this, something more than the Shining Stone. And I hate to think what."

He was still remembering a mad Martian's story.

BELLS clanged. The vibration of the rockets ceased. Through the ports came a weird, green glow as they passed close to the atmosphere of Neptune. The spacer swung around that planet, using its gravity as a pivot, then the Earthmen saw the single tiny satellite which V'Naric had called Dhovril.

An hour later they were there, slanting down over a terrain of desert and serrated cliffs. The great ball of Neptune hung behind, filling half the sky, its glow casting just enough light over the satellite to tinge everything with a greenish grotesquerie.

"Lord, that gives me the creeps!" Blake muttered, peering out.

"This little planet must be pretty heavy, though," Janus estimated. "Gravity seems about right."

They passed beyond the cliffs and over a large desert. Then, far ahead, they saw the towering stone edifices of a city, gleaming a ghastly skull-white in the green tinged atmosphere. Devries turned his face away. He recognized the city from the Martian's description.

Before they quite reached there, however, Blake cried: "Look! Down there!"

Far below them, covering a large section of desert, were row after row of blunt-nosed objects, looking like tiny silvery bugs, except they were motionless. But they weren't bugs. They were spaceships. Hundreds, perhaps thousands of them in formidable array.

Ketrik stared, then turned to Devries and exclaimed: "Hah! Thought you said these Proktols stuck close to home! Offhand I'd say they've got other ideas now. I wonder what? I don't like the look of that fleet down there!"

But now their spacer was gliding in low over the city, settling down into landing cradles.

Janus turned to his men. "If we see a chance, we'd better make a break for it! I'd like to get at the Controls of this ship just once!"

"I'd rather get at our atom-blasts!" Ketrik snapped.

But they had no chance to do either. A score of the Proktols, with flame-pistols alert, came to escort them out. As they marched down a wide avenue thousands of the gathered populace gave vent to prolonged shouting, or rather shrilling. It was definitely unfriendly, and somehow fanatical, anticipatory.

The Earthmen looked at these inhabitants with interest. They seemed to be Proktols too, but in several ways were different from V'Naric and the others. They were smaller, hardly four feet tall, and frailer if that were possible. And they had no antennae. Neither did they wear any raiment that the Earthmen could see—evidence of their semi-savagery. But they seemed to respect the larger Proktols, for although their shrilling continued, they kept their distance and didn't touch the Earthmen.

"Just listen to those devils!" Blake said. "They're waiting, expecting something!"

They reached a vast plaza in the center of the city. Their captors marched them through the mass of shrilling little coppery devils, and into a building; then up a flight of stairs and into a bare stone room with a single tiny window looking out upon the square below.

As the last of the Proktols passed out of the room he pressed a key into a slot outside the doorway. A sheet of bluish, crackling flame leaped up from the floor, effectively barring the entrance.

JANUS whirled to the window. A louder sound came swelling up from the tiny savages below as they caught sight of him.

"Shut up, we haven't got your damned Shining Stone! I wish V'Naric would tell 'em so," he added, coming away. "Sounds like they want our blood!"

Devries had a better idea of what they wanted, but he kept still. They hadn't long to wait. V'Naric came. He left some of his men outside, shut off the electrical barrier and stepped into the room and turned it on again. He held his flame-pistol ready in his hand.

"I am indeed sorry to have kept you waiting," he said wtih over-emphasized politeness, "but I had to consult with the *Lahk-tzor* as to your disposal. He has waited long. He is anxious to begin."

"And who might he be?" asked Janus, glaring.

V'Naric turned serious black eyes upon him. *"Lahk-tzor,"* he said, obviously seeking the right term, "is our word for what you Earthmen might call the Greatest One, or the Ultimate—or more laterally, perhaps, the Brain."

"The Brain, eh?" Ketrik spoke up scornfully. "Well, if this Brain of yours has half the sense it was born with, it'll think twice before—"

V'Naric turned on him with suddenly angry eyes, and Janus intervened quickly: "Just what is this Brain, or *Lahk-tzor?* And if he's in authority here, why don't you take us to him?"

"That is not necessary. He is interested in you, but very impersonally." V'Naric's voice was cold. "I have been instructed to allow you to choose among yourselves who will be the One."

"The One?" Blake whispered to Devries. "What does he mean, the One?"

"For the Ritual," V'Naric said, as though they should have known.

"And suppose," Janus said, "none of us chooses to be the One?"

V'Naric shrugged in a purely Earthian manner and raised the flame-pistol a bit higher. "Then it will be a pleasure for me to choose for you."

"No, thanks." Janus glanced at the others questioningly, hesitated, then took a notebook from his pocket and tore a page into four strips of varying length.

Devries was watching his friends' faces. Either they didn't know what was going to happen or were pretending not to. Devries said: "You know what he means by the Ritual! It's just his polite word for the torture I was telling you about!"

None of them answered, and he knew that they knew.

V'Naric's emotionless black eyes watched them.

They drew, recklessly, and Blake held the shortest slip. His face went suddenly pale but he did not say a word.

V'Naric was disappointed. He stared past Blake at Ketrik. He said, "I wish it were you," as his eyes tinged with the angry orange again. He glanced around at them, then he went on musingly: "The *Lahk-tzor* need not know, and it can make no difference. Yes, it will be you!" He gestured with the flame-pistol.

"That's all right with me," said Ketrik contemptuously. Blake started to protest but Ketrik brushed him aside. "It's all right, I know what I'm doing. I defy these devils to do their worst." But he flashed them a look that said, "be ready!"

But V'Naric watched too closely. As they moved to the doorway he kept the pistol trained. He produced the key that shut off the electrical barrier. They passed outside, and it leaped up again.

The three men inside could dimly see through it. And they saw V'Naric's eyes turn away for a half-second.

Ketrik bent and lunged forward in one swift motion, flooring the frail Proktol in a vicious tackle. He snatched up the flame-pistol and sprayed it in a semi-circle as other Proktols came rushing in. Four or five fell with holes burned through their frail bodies. Still others came. Ketrik's arms flailed. His fist caught one squarely

in the middle, and the brittle shell-like skin popped open in a wide gap as a thick colorless fluid oozed out. He hit another in the head, something snapped and the head dangled grotesquely. Ketrik's knee came up and another Proktol popped open, exuding a viscous stuff.

But there had been too many out there waiting. Their bodies were frail but their limbs were like steel cables. The men just inside the room could only look on helplessly as Ketrik went down, still swinging elbows and knees. A dozen wiry arms lashed him to the floor.

V'Naric rose to his feet, staggering a little, holding his middle as though he wished to vomit. He snatched a flame-pistol, aimed it, and changed his mind. He gave a staccato command in his own language.

"Can't blame me for trying!" Ketrik sang out to his friends, as he was hurried down the stairs.

THROUGH the window they could see the horde of tiny Proktols still gathered in the square below. Suddenly the murmuring leaped to a louder clamor. Then they saw the reason for it. Ketrik was being dragged out into the square, through the throng toward a little dais. From the dais rose a single pillar of stone.

They fastened him securely to the pillar. The clamoring subsided a little. Those savages were waiting for something—just as the three Earthmen were waiting, watching the scene below them.

Some of the larger Proktols brought a huge metal disc, perhaps three feet in diameter. A hole was in the center. They put it over Ketrik's head and it rested on his shoulders.

"I don't like the looks of that," Janus muttered tensely. "What are they going to do?"

But they weren't through. Next, over Ketrik's head they placed a spacious wire cage which clicked into place on the rim of the disc.

"My God!" Blake said suddenly, staring. "Do you suppose they're going to run some kind of voltage through that thing?"

"That's a nice pleasant thought!" Janus snapped at him.

Devries turned away from them both. He knew better. "No," he told Blake hoarsely. "No, not that. Better come away."

But they couldn't come away. Horror, especially an unknown horror, has a fascination. They saw some of the Proktols seemingly in consulation. Presently a couple of them hurried away, and all that could be heard from that massed throng was a gentle murmuring as they swayed restlessly, waiting.

Then in the room behind them they heard the electrical crackling in the doorway cease. V'Naric stood before them again, ever watchful with the flame-pistol.

"That was a very noble effort on the part of your friend," he said, "but quite useless as you can see. Moreover, he killed some of my men, and I do not think he helped the rest of you by that." His eyes glittered. "Yes, before the Ritual ends this time I think all of you will have participated."

"We haven't got your damned Shining Stone," Blake grated through clenched teeth, "and we never even heard of it!"

"The Shining Stone? Oh, yes, I had quite forgotten I told you about it; but I neglected to say that it is quite safe. It is always quite safe, even when it is stolen; because, you see—*we* stole it."

"*You* stole it!" Janus repeated. "But didn't you say the Stone meant little to such as you?"

"Only as a means to an end. Commander Janus, you are a scientific man above all else. For that reason I respect you as much as I despise your stupid friend down there. I shall explain the Ritual you are about to witness. First: those little savages think you Earthmen stole their Shining Stone, because we wish them to think that; and you could never convince them otherwise. Therefore they must have their revenge. All this is very necessary for a certain reason you will understand shortly."

"I'm beginning to already," Blake said bitterly. "It's a high-powered racket and we're the fall guys."

V'Naric looked at him as though he didn't quite understand such English words.

A sudden, louder murmur came up from below.

"It has begun," V'Naric said, nodding

toward the window. "If you will observe, please."

The men turned back to the window and watched. Devries at least half knew what to expect; but he felt the other two tense beside him as they realized the purpose of that cage over Ketrik's head.

A little door in the side of it was open, and one of the official Proktols was thrusting several tiny animals inside. They were sharp-fanged, scaled, almost reptilian. But they had beady little rodent eyes, and the eyes blinked as the animals scurried around the disc under the cage. Ketrik's head jerked convulsively at the nearness of them.

"Little inhabitants of our desert," came V'Naric's calm voice across the room behind them. "Ordinarily quite tame and harmless. But these are trained for this. They are very hungry."

The Earthmen's minds were too numbed just then. They didn't feel the full horror until sometime later. They just stood there in terrible fascination, staring down, unable to move; and behind them they could still hear V'Naric's cold voice, as though he were a class-room lecturer. He didn't even need to look as he spoke. He knew what was happening. He had seen this many times.

"The little creatures are a bit restless now. I imagine the way your friend moves his head frightens them. But they will become used to that presently, and then their work will begin."

But something else was happening down there. The crowd had become silent, not even a murmuring. They all seemed to be looking in the same direction, away from the dais where the Earthman was fastened. Then a path opened up. A procession of the large Proktols came through, with something on a movable platform in the midst of them.

Again V'Naric's voice: "I suppose the *Lahk-tzor* is entering now. Or the Brain as you would undoubtedly call it."

"Good Lord, yes," Janus murmured at last, staring. "That's what I'd call it, for that's what it is!"

THE Brain was huge, five feet or more across, convoluted and pale but red-streaked. A dome of glass enclosed it. Beneath the bulging, pale-pink mass was something that might have been two tiny eyes and the veriest excuse of a chin, but from their distance the Earthmen could not be sure.

V'Naric's voice droned on, beating through their numbed consciousness: "You are wondering about the Brain. Long ago one of our race, one far ahead of his time, created it. In a period of six months he advanced evolution from a single cell through all its stages to what you see now. The *Lahk-tzor*—pardon me—the Brain down there is the most advanced evolutionary product yet to exist in this solar system. It slew its creator, but seemed to exhaust all its energy in so doing. For a long, long time it lay dormant. Such scientists as there were at the time tried to activate it, for they knew it wasn't dead; but their efforts were clumsy and futile.

"Then one day it began to pulse and think again, feebly. Do you know when, and why? I think you could guess, Commander Janus. It was the day the Shining Stone came flashing to land here. That event caused a tremendous religious hysteria among the savages, and it wasn't hard to connect that with the Brain's revival; the Brain was absorbing the accumulative mental flow that was impacting against it! Of course it has long been proven that thought is material just as light is material."

Of the three, Janus alone was beginning to show a gleam of interest as he listened to the toneless words. "I think I see the whole system now," he said bitterly. "Periodically you pull this Ritual business and get those little savages down there religiously worked up, in order to—" The idea was so ghastly he choked on the words and couldn't go on.

"In order to keep the Brain mentally activated," V'Naric finished for him. "Precisely. To those savages it is nothing more than a religious ritual, brought about by the revenge motive. But to us it is a scientific necessity. The Brain teaches us much. It was the Brain which thought out all our technicalities of space travel and most of our other achievements. By now it realizes we have no intention of letting it die; but periodically its thought-processes seem exhausted. When it feels that happening it informs us. Then we

must activate it again, through the accumulative mental-hysteria of those thousands of little Proktols. It is easy to steal their Shining Stone, keep it safely in our custody awhile, and bring some hapless spacefarer here for them to vent their hysteria upon. A little complex and a little sardonic, but very necessary."

Janus, listening, nodded dully. He was remembering the huge fleet of space-ships they had seen waiting out on the desert; but he did not mention them. Instead he said: "And right now, what scientific problem is the Brain working on?"

V'Naric seemed proud to talk of the Brain, appreciative of Janus' scientific interest in it. "We can never quite tell what the Brain is thinking," he explained. "It propounds scientific theories to us, we put them to the test, and they are usually practical. But this I know: lately a change has come over it. We are sure it is planning something big. It never used to question us much, but now it is beginning to, about other planets, the solar system, the universe. Then it ponders.

"You see, it has never been away from here. It is restless now and I think it has ambitions! But we shall learn its plans when it has thought them through. From the astronomical data we have furnished it propounds vast calculations. Mathematically it is supreme! And it ponders. . . ."

NOW, suddenly, the sound below burst forth into a tremendous surge of unified shrilling. Hysteria. That's the word V'Naric had used, and this sounded like it! As if something interesting had started to happen.

They turned quickly to the window again. Yes, something had begun to happen. There was a wide flow of red down Ketrik's cheek. The sharp-fanged little beasts under the cage had begun their work, just as V'Naric had said they would. Another of them darted forward. Ketrik's head jerked, but it was useless. Another flow of red started down; again came the surge of hysterical sound.

No man should have watched that scene long, but they couldn't tell how many minutes they stood there at the window. Blake cracked first. He whirled away suddenly toward the doorway.

But V'Naric had silently gone, and the crackling sheet of flame across the entrance filled the room with a bluish glow. Blake stood tottering a moment, horror still in his eyes, a little moan deep in his throat; then he staggered over and flopped into a bunk at the side of the room, turning his face away.

Janus and Devries continued to look, but only for a few minutes more. V'Naric had said those vicious little animals were hungry; now, becoming bolder, they darted frequently at Ketrick's twisting head only a foot or so away. Ketrik didn't utter a sound, but every time another red streak started down they saw his features were contorted. Pretty soon they couldn't even see his features.

His eyes were shut tight, but once he opened them and twisted his head around and saw the men looking down. He tried to smile, but it was a grimace. He called, "Devries, remember what you swore! Do it! Get back to Earth if you can, then bring men out here and blast these devils to the hell where they belong! If you promise somehow to do that, I won't mind this so much. Don't watch any more, no telling how long—"

Ketrik stopped on that word, as his head jerked violently away again.

And all the while came the shrillings from the immense, watching throng. The men heard it rise and fall, rise and fall, in regular cadence. They could almost feel the impact of the hate going out, the hate for that Earthman who supposedly had violated their sacred Stone. Those savages didn't wish to tear Ketrik limb from limb; they had been trained in *this*, and it was a better revenge, more to their enjoyment.

A little apart, carefully guarded, was the huge Brain, grotesque and convoluted under its glass dome. Janus even thought he could see it pulsing rhythmically as the bursts of sound and thought-force swelled out to it. That tangible force was being absorbed, and gradually the Brain was taking on a deeper hue than the pale-pink.

Savagely the men paced the stone room. They examined the electrical barrier across the door, which was too obviously deadly. "How long does that go on?"

Janus asked in horror, nodding toward the window.

"To the very end, I'm afraid," Devries replied. Twice more in the following hours he moved to the window, only to look quickly away when he saw the horrible thing was still going on. He couldn't see Ketrik moving any more, but the beasts were still at work.

And then, it must have been hours later, Devries awoke from a fitful sleep. He was conscious that all was silent as a tomb below. He crept to the window and saw that a weird kind of greenish, shadowy nightfall had come over the place. All those savage Proktols had gone away, and the Brain was gone, and the square below was empty. Save for Ketrik. He was still there, and the cage was still over his head, but it was empty.

Thank God, Devries thought, it's all over for him. But who will be next?

WHEN next he awoke it was day again, or what served for day on that shadowy world; and the first thing he saw was Blake over at the window.

"You fool, come away from there!" Devries cried, springing up. "What good is it to watch? It's all over now for Ketrik anyway."

Blake turned to face him, and Devries saw a look in his eyes similar to that he had seen in the Martian's.

"He's alive, still alive!" Blake cried. "And it's still going on!"

It was then Devries heard those sounds of hate surging up again, and knew that the throng had again gathered to watch; but it was Blake's voice, and the look in his eyes, that made Devries' blood run cold.

"And I should have been down there instead of him!" Blake said; but the voice didn't sound like his any longer.

Devries should have watched him closer. He turned to wake Janus. Blake sprang suddenly past him, toward the doorway. Devries made a grab at him and missed. Blake leaped straight into that crackling sheet of electrical blueness.

But he didn't get through. He seemed to hang suspended in the air for a few seconds; then he crashed to the floor across the doorway, as the electrical flame enveloped and crackled over his body.

There was nothing they could do about Blake except keep their faces averted from the entrance where his charred body lay. But they couldn't close their ears to the waves of sound that came up from below. It seemed even more suggestive than before. Blake's words kept hammering in Devries' brain: "He's alive, still alive!" Blake had been the last to look out that window. Devries hated to think of what he had seen down there.

Grimly they examined the room again, although they'd done so a hundred times before. Two bare stone walls. In the third wall the window, far too narrow, and the adjacent stones solid and unmovable. In the fourth side the doorway, open except for the deadly sheet of blue crackling across it.

"That's the only way," Devries said, nodding toward it. "I'm sure V'Naric will be around here again; when he comes, watch for my nod and we'll make a rush. If we die, at least it won't be the way Ketrik did."

V'Naric did come again. He stared down at Blake's charred body and shook his head distressfully as he shut off the flame. He motioned for some of his men to take the body away.

"That is too bad," he said. "Very wasteful. It leaves only two of you." He nodded to the window. "It will soon be over with your friend down there, and I regret that. The fools have allowed it to progress too rapidly!"

Janus' attention was more on the flame-pistol than on the words. He glanced quickly at Devries, but the latter flashed him a look that said no.

V'Naric must have seen it. He raised the pistol slightly so that it leveled between them. "You are quite right," he said, "it would not be wise."

Janus tried to engage him in more conversation, but V'Naric seemed to know his purpose. He left, still watching them carefully as he shut off the flame and stepped out and turned it on again. His last words were: "I will leave you to decide between yourselves who will be next. It will be soon."

JANUS whirled angrily. "Why didn't you take the chance? Now we're

sunk. We'll probably never have another!"

"You're wrong," Devries replied. "Empty your pockets, quick!"

Janus stared at him, uncomprehending. "That slot in the doorway!" Devries explained. "I watched how V'Naric worked that key. I can't hope to duplicate it, but if we have a pocket knife or something—we *might* make a short circuit! Should have thought of that before."

Already he was searching his own pockets, and Janus quickly followed his example.

But their hopes waned. Neither of them had a knife, and what was worse, they had nothing else that might serve the purpose.

Devries turned away in despair. "Wouldn't you know it! And I always carry a knife—all except this time!"

Janus was still searching. Suddenly he gave a shout as he produced something from an inside pocket. A round, flat metal object. Devries saw that it was an ancient half-dollar. He had seen very few of them, and only in museums.

"My good luck charm," Janus said wistfully. "I've carried it with me ever since my first space flight."

Devries seized it eagerly. "We'll see how lucky it is!" He examined the narrow slot in the doorway, but its length was considerably less than the diameter of the coin. Nor could he tell how deep that slot was.

"We've got to get this down to proportion," Devries said grimly. "Even then it may not work, but we've got to try anything." He began rubbing the edge of the coin against the bare stone, and the rounded edge flattened infinitesimally. "Quite a job on our hands; we've got to get this diameter down to less than half!"

Taking turns, they kept at it, holding the coin in strips of cloth to protect their fingers from the heat of the metal. While one worked the other watched the doorway. Occasionally a Proktol passed by, but V'Naric did not come again.

Once Janus moved to the window and ventured to look down at the Brain again, but carefully kept his gaze averted from the spot where Ketrik was. Now he could distinctly see the huge mass of the Brain pulsing with the impact of the thought-force that swelled out to it. And now it was not pale-pink, it was red. It was even more than blood-red, it seemed fiery. He could sense the pulsing power of it, the super-mental force, and it seemed diabolic. Here, he knew, was a dangerous thing, a thing that should not exist in this solar system.

"Do you know what I think?" Janus said, turning back to Devries who was again working on the coin. "That Brain is mad! It's bound to be. God knows how long it's been receiving those Proktols' thought-force, living and thriving and planning on it—and that thought-force is hate! V'Naric said it's getting ambitions. Ambitions for *conquest,* I think. That's all that fleet of space-ships out there can mean!"

They worked slowly but steadily with the coin, gradually wearing its diameter down to fit the slot in the doorway. What they feared mostly now was that the Proktols would very soon be through with Ketrik down there, and one of them would be next.

But luck was with them. Suddenly, startlingly, that green shadowy nightfall came again. "Listen!" Devries said. All was silent again in the square below. He rushed to the window and saw the throng dispersing. The Brain, on its portable platform, was moving away into one of the buildings. Apparently the Ritual was over for the day.

"We'll have to work fast!" Devries exclaimed. "This side of the planet's away from Neptune now, but we don't know how long it'll last. This is our last chance!"

They worked frantically, risking skinned fingers on the stone wall. About an hour later Devries tried the mutilated coin in the slot, for perhaps the twentieth time, and this time it fitted. But would it reach as far as V'Naric's key had reached? Devries wrapped his fingers carefully with strips of cloth before he tried.

For a moment he thought it was useless. The metal touched nothing. Clumsily he managed to slide it forward a tiny bit more, and the silver oblong barely touched a hard surface.

Instantly at the contact there came a

sputter of fused metal. The silver became suddenly hot under Devries' fingers. Sparks leaped out and burnt his hand. But he didn't care. He suppressed a joyous shout as the sheet of electrical flame across the doorway ceased.

They sprang through the door and stood a moment in the dim corridor, listening. Evidently their tampering had caused no other alarm. They moved swiftly to the stairs leading down into the square.

Peering down through the greenish dusk, they could see one of the Proktols at the bottom of the steps, evidently on guard. Devries gestured downward, and Janus nodded silently.

Those steps were solid stone, and they negotiated them silently by all Earthly standards, but they had forgotten these creatures had super-sensitive hearing. They weren't over halfway down when the Proktol sprang up, whirling to face them.

Devries acted on sheer instinct. He made the remaining distance through the air in one prodigious leap. The Proktol had reached for its flame-pistol, at the same time opening its mouth to sound an alarm. But there was only a shrilling gasp as Devries' shoulder caught it in the middle and hurled it backward.

Devries climbed to his feet, a little dazed. Janus took only one look at the Proktol and saw that the frail body was snapped in two; quickly he confiscated its flame-pistol. They stood quite still, listening, but there was no alarm.

IN some of the radiating streets they could see the weird glow of many colored lights moving about, but the square seemed empty now in the gloom. They started to move across it, when something caught Janus' attention. He stopped.

Only a little distance away a stone pillar rose from a dais. A dark blur of a figure still sagged there with a wide, wire cage over its head. Janus stared through the gloom. He knew it was Ketrik, but there was something vaguely wrong, unnatural, about it. Something he could not immediately make out.

He moved swiftly nearer to find out. Devries, knowing what he would see, called a warning. But Janus didn't stop. He didn't stop until he came very near, and the full horror of the sight burst suddenly upon his vision.

The Ritual had gone on to the very end.

Through the ghastly, greenish dusk all that Janus saw was a white gleaming skull upon a still living body. He knew the body lived for he saw it still breathing, faintly, and he saw one of the outstretched hands twitch. And from somewhere in the throat he heard a horrible little gurgling sound as though the skull were trying to speak. The brain, of course, had not been touched, but Janus knew the brain within that skull must now be mad. He could no longer think of the thing as Ketrik.

In those few seconds that he looked, Janus felt his mind slowly slipping away into a chaos of vertiginous horror, but he caught it on the brink. Instinctively he raised the flame-pistol, aimed, and made very sure that the thing which had been Ketrik no longer lived.

Devries gave a cry of warning. Four or five thin, shadowy figures were leaping from a nearby street. They had probably seen the flash of the flame-pistol.

Devries tensed. "For Lord's sake fire! Let 'em have it!" he cried hoarsely to Janus, as the creatures bounded nearer in long leaping strides. But Janus stood there, swaying a little, still dazed by the sight he had just seen.

Devries leaped to his side, snatched the flame-pistol just as the Proktols came within range. One of them reached for its pistol. At the same time Devries let his flash out in a sweeping path. He was about two seconds quicker. The Proktols' momentum carried them straight into it, and they crumpled with hardly a sound.

Devries grasped Janus' arm and shook him out of his daze. "That way!" he whispered, indicating a wide street across the square. "It's the way we came in. If we can get out into that desert, we might steal one of those space-ships we saw!"

But the delay had been fatal. Other Proktols had seen the flash, and were hurying toward them. Janus stopped to snatch up a fallen flame-pistol, then

they were leaping away across the square.

But they didn't get far. Now, not dozens, but hordes of Proktols were converging on the scene. The entire square seemed to resound with their shrilling cries, bringing others. The Earthmen hadn't even time to wonder where they all came from. Most of them were the smaller, savage Proktols, unarmed; but some of the others with flame-pistols were trying to press through.

As the men swept their flaming fire around, the savages fell back in shrilling panic. Scores of them were burned down, but more of the creatures kept surging in. The Earthmen knew it would be only a matter of seconds before the sheer mass of the creatures overwhelmed them. Still they pressed forward, slowly burning a way through.

For some foolish reason Devries remembered shouting at Janus: "These flame-pistols are all right as toys. Wish I had an atom-blast!" Then the shrilling coppery devils were closing around, clawing. Janus brought down some more with a sweeping blast, and Devries did the same, but the flame-charges were getting very weak.

Then the Earthmen stared. The savages were no longer pressing around them; they were fleeing away! For no reason at all they saw the space ahead of them open up. They saw a long, clean swath of Proktols topple like grain cut down by a mower. Those that did not fall fled frantically, shrilling in thin terror at a strangely invisible death.

The men couldn't quite understand what had happened, but they took swift advantage of the miracle and darted across the now open square. But the larger Proktols weren't so superstitious. A dozen of them, now unimpeded, came leaping to intercept them. But before these Proktols could raise their flame-pistols, they toppled too, cut clean in two! All was clear around the men now, and they paused to catch a breath.

"What the devil was it, Janus? What happened?"

"Pure luck! I knew that lucky piece of mine couldn't fail!"

But just then a figure emerged from the dark shadow of a building, and ran toward them. It was a familiar figure, and it held two atom-blasts, one of which it thrust into Devries' hands.

"Luck nothing!" Devries yelled, recognizing him. "It's Ross! How did you escape? We thought you died on the *Wasp!*"

"NOT quite," Ross said. "Come on, this is no picnic! Let's get out of here before those devils stop wondering what an atom-blast is."

The men turned and sprinted for the open street ahead of them. But they hadn't taken five steps when Devries felt a crushing, numbing weight upon his brain. He staggered, fell to his knees; tried to rise but couldn't. Then he fell flat, as a force hit him like a giant invisible hand. Agonizingly he wondered why the others didn't help him; then he saw that they too were lying flat, dazed and panting heavily.

With a tremendous effort Devries twisted his head around and looked across the square. He saw the huge Brain under its glass dome. It was pulsing with a fiery, angry red radiance. And Devries knew it was the Brain's tremendous thought-force that was reaching out and crushing them there.

His right hand, still grasping the atom-blast, was doubled under him. Desperately he tried to move it—and did—about an inch. It seemed to weigh a ton. With a tremendous effort that took all his strength, Devries managed to slide his hand around so the atom-blast was trained on the Brain across the square. With his last ounce of strength he pressed the power button and held it there.

Devries knew his aim was good, but that dome over the Brain must have been of tougher substance that he thought. It did not blast, although he held the weapon there for about five seconds, on full power.

But the Brain must have felt the menace. There came a great surge of anger, and the atom-blast was suddenly torn from Devries' hand, as was the one Ross held. Then the men were jerked to their feet by the same invisible force which had held them prone upon the pavement. The Brain, still pulsing angrily, held them there until dozens of the official Proktols came and grasped

them; not until then did it withdraw its powerful thought-force.

Janus and Devries, with Ross accompanying them this time, were hurried back toward that building from which they had just escaped at such pains. Now Devries saw the huge, green glowing Neptune rising swiftly in the heavens, and realized that day was here again. And already the hordes of savage Proktols were coming again into the square, to await their Ritual, which would undoubtedly continue so long as there were victims.

"Too bad you had to come here, Ross," Devries said dully. He was utterly without hope now. They had come very close to escape, and they would have made it, had it not been for that diabolical Brain.

DEVRIES was just wondering how he could die, but not the way Ketrik had, when they heard a great cry go up from the gathered throng behind them. And it was a cry of fear, or awe. Despite the wiry arms that held them, the men twisted around and looked back.

Coming toward them, low over the city, was a rocket-plane. And it was undeniably an Earth type of plane! The Proktols holding the three men jabbered excitedly in their own staccato language; then, still holding the men, they hurried to the shelter of the nearest building and crouched there. It sounded very much as if they had seen this rocket-plane before, and feared it!

The Proktols crowding in the square were trying to flee too; but before they could all disperse, the plane was over them, letting loose a wide swath of death. From the extent of it, the Earthmen judged that rocket-plane must carry a portable atom-blast nearly as large as the Patrol ships carried! It swept over the square once, veered sharply and came back. This time the atom-blast swept very close to the line of buildings where the men crouched. Their captors broke and raced for shelter.

But the Earthmen were not yet free. As they crouched there, watching their unknown benefactor, they felt the fierce surge of power from the Brain again. It alone did not flee. It remained there, on its platform, in the middle of the now deserted square. And if it was angry before, it was raging now, with a crimson, crackling radiance.

For it was the Brain which was the object of the rocket-plane's attack. A third, fourth, and yet a fifth time the plane came sweeping back over the square. And each time it did so, the Earthmen could feel part of the crushing thought-force which the Brain hurled upward at it. Invisible weapon against invisible weapon. Atom-blast versus the Brain's super mental-force!

And the Brain fought tenaciously. Such was its power that the rocket-plane was caught in its grip once, veered crazily and was almost buffeted down until an extra burst of the rockets sent it zooming away. The watching Earthmen felt that power too, and were sent spinning, bruised and battered, against the building where they crouched.

But the plane's atom-blast must have begun to find the range, because soon the Brain propelled itself toward the shelter of one of the buildings. It was angry, but it was intelligent. It recognized the danger of that atom-blast. The transparent dome encasing the Brain was of very tough material, but it would have soon crumbled under a few direct and powerful blasts.

It was not until the Brain had withdrawn to safety that the tension eased, and the men dared to leap across the square again, strewn with the ghastly remains of numberless Proktols. This time they were not apprehended. The mysterious rocket-plane was speeding away toward the desert, but the destruction had been so terrible that the remaining Proktols didn't care or dare to emerge.

Devries spied one of the atom-blasts that he or Ross had dropped. He snatched it up, stopped and looked back speculatively, weighing the weapon in his hand.

Janus pulled at him. "Come on, you don't know when you're lucky!"

"Yes, but I'd like to take at least one good blast at that Brain after the way it slapped and battered us around!" Devries stumbled along after them, unwillingly.

"Have you got the *Wasp?*" Janus finally managed to ask Ross.

"I didn't get here through the fourth dimension! It's out on the desert there, just about a mile from here. I had a close call when they turned that flame on the *Wasp*. I got to a space-suit just in time. Kept their ship in our visipanel long enough to see they were heading back for Neptune. Took me hours to repair the *Wasp*, and hours more to find you." Ross very prudently didn't ask about Blake or Ketrik, and Janus was glad of that.

THEY reached the *Wasp*, and lost litle time in blasting out into space.

"What about that fleet of space-ships we saw down there?" Devries asked. "Can't we go down and blast them off the map?"

"It would take days," replied Commander Janus, "and we're lucky to be away from there as it is!"

"But—"

"Haven't you had enough action this trip?" Janus snapped.

"Look," Ross said suddenly, pointing down at the tiny satellite they had just left. Blasting out into space from that planet was a sleek, black space-ship.

Janus exclaimed: "That's Perrin—I'd recognize his ship anywhere! That must have been his rocket-plane we saw fighting with the Brain! And we came out here to get that pirate!"

He leaped to the radio, clicked it on. "Attention Perrin! Perrin, in the *Princess!* Commander Janus of Earth Patrol ship *Wasp* speaking. We now have our long-range blast trained upon you, and you cannot outrun a Patrol ship. You will please go into a drift while we come over to board you."

A voice replied almost immediately, calm and a little amused: "Very well, Commander, do not get excited. I was just coming over to you, but if you wish, come to me instead." The rockets of the *Princess* immediately ceased blasting, and the pirate ship drifted just a few hundred miles away.

The *Wasp* drew near and made contact. Janus spoke again: "Our lock is ready. I should prefer that you came across, Perrin. No tricks!"

A minute later Perrin stepped through their lock with his hands held high, mockingly. He was tall, darkly handsome, with a straightforwardness that put Commander Janus ill at ease. Perrin smiled and looked down at his belt. "My pistol, Commander? That is customary I believe."

Janus stepped forward and took it. Perrin lowered his hands and said, "That is beter. I was going to come over anyway, and see who it was I saved down there. I thought you were Earthmen, but I wasn't sure."

There was a slight mockery in the words. Janus flushed a little as he said: "This is damned awkward, Perrin. You did save our lives, but we were sent out here to get you, you're wanted on three planets."

"Three? I thought it was four," said Perrin, still smiling. "But I quite understand, Commander, and I ask no favors. As for saving your lives, that was a side issue. I really came to take a crack at that Brain. What did you think of our duel?"

"Interesting," murmured Janus. He was still uncomfortable, wavering between his duty and his debt of honor.

"Yes, wasn't it?" Perrin said. "You know, that thing's gettting more powerful than I ever thought possible! Oh, sure, I've had a couple of other encounters with it. It's too canny to let me get a good crack at it, but how it hates me! I've been hanging around out here to see what it's up to."

"Then you know about that fleet of space-ships down there," Devries spoke up. "What do you think? Is that Brain going to direct that fleet toward the inner planets by remote control?"

"No," replied Perrin, reflectively. "That's not too fantastic a thought, but the Brain's not that powerful yet. However, those Proktols might man the ships. I think that's the plan. Did you notice those antennae they have? That's the way the Brain contacts them, and it might control them from any distance! Another thing: did you notice their flame-pistols? Modelled after the ones the Martians use, but an improvement. If you men left any atom-blasts there, the Brain'll soon find out how they click, and they'll turn out their own. And *they'll* be an improvement. That entire space fleet will be

equipped with them. But that fleet's not quite ready to move yet; they've got to have fuel."

"You mean," said Devries, "they haven't any?"

Perrin laughed softly. "They *did* have. Those Proktols were mining it on Neptune—greenish grained stuff, something like the Tynyte we get from the Mars mountains. I watched their operations awhile, secretly. It seems to be pretty hard stuff to get out. I waited until they had quite a supply, then I swooped down and blasted it all sky high, together with a few score Proktols. That's just one more reason they hate me. But they're still mining, and getting more of the fuel out."

Janus had been listening to the pirate's words. Now he paced the control room, nervously. "That would give us time," he said softly to himself. "We could get back to Earth in a week, at full speed." He stopped and looked up. "Yes," he said aloud, "we're going back to Earth immediately!"

"Very well, Commander Janus," said Perrin, looking straight at him. "But I trust you will take the *Princess* in tow? I love that ship very much."

"Not you, Perrin! You're not going."

"Not me, Commander? I wonder what you can mean?" The pirate's black eyes were glowing.

"Perrin, suppose I should get very careless and you suddenly escaped. I wonder where you'd escape to?"

Perrin glanced out at the glowing ball of Neptune. He was smiling again, but it was a grim little smile. "I have a hideout," he said, "which not even those Proktols have found yet. I imagine they have a lot more of that fuel mined by now, and I just love for them to hate me."

Janus glanced at the space-lock, and turned his back. When next he looked he saw the trim, black *Princess* speeding unerringly back toward Neptune, a thousand miles away.

Devries alone was regretful, almost bitter. He weighed the familiar atom-blast in his hand. "And I didn't even get to use this! Damn it, Janus, you know what that Brain's doing, planning. If they keep on with those sacrifices, feeding it that mental force, who knows how far it'll go? It's a potential menace, it oughtn't to be allowed to exist!"

"Devries, stop gibbering!" Once again Janus was in his familiar role, Commander of the *Wasp* of the Earth Patrol. "Ross! Stand by in the rocket room for orders; we're on double duty now."

"Yes, sir! It's a pleasure, sir." Ross hurried away.

"Devries! Start charting our course for Earth."

"Yes sir." Devries turned to the charts, disgruntled but obedient. Janus took over the controls. But a moment later he turned.

"I know it, Devries. Don't think I'm forgetting what they did to Ketrik, and what we promised him. You see, that's why I want to be sure of making a thorough job of it!"

"Yes sir," Devries said again, briskly, and he was satisfied. As the hideous green ball of Neptune rolled away behind them he didn't even look back; for he knew they'd be out here again—and soon—with more than a Patrol ship and a few atom-blasts.

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MARTIANS, Venusians, Saturnians, Neptunians and Jerseyites—you're invited, all of you, to vizigraph in your messages. Kicks, kudos, bombs and bouquets—our expert operator can take it. All PS asks is that you make your vizigrams helpful and interesting.

WINNERS in PLANET STORIES' Illustration Sweepstakes this time are No. 1 Lynn Bridges, No. 2 Chuck Hidley, No. 3 Vaughan Heiner. Due to the large number of good letters that have gone unpublished and unsung each issue, and the constant demand for more Vizigraph space, this department has moved into larger quarters. We hope you'll like the new setup.

THE EDS.

"—THE LADS CHANGED IT TO STINK-BUG"

5359 Raphael St.,
Los Angeles, Cal.

DEAR EDITOR:

Look!

I buy these S.F. Magazines just to read the fan letters.

I come from a long line of Postmen.

Frankly, I think the fan mail is better than the stories. This guy Asimov seems to be in every magazine. His letters are much better than his stories. I think you should illustrate them!

If a new magazine comes out without a fan letter from "Asenion" it's not a Science Fiction rag. What do you folks do, get the guy to write a letter and then build a magazine around it?

He went into quite a "to do" about someone signing his name "Asenion." Now personally I like the "Asenion" better than "Asimov." Why not suggest that he abbreviate his title? What's that old line about a Rose by any other name would still smell?

For instance, my middle name is "Genius."

How would you like to sign checks by that name? Luckily when I first started school the lads changed it to "Stink-bug."

Just to help our friend Isaac out all day I've been repeating, "Asenion—Asimov." You know, just to see which one sounds the best. My young daughter took it up and her mother washed her mouth out with soap—so my suggestion to Isaac is to have his name changed to Smith or Brown, Giggleworth, or Rosenswitch.

Incidentally, I can't say that I care a lot for your cover. It's too lurid. Science Fiction readers buy everything which comes out anyway, so you don't need that sort of a cover to sell your product. Also, I think it is High Time that Science Fiction magazines became a little more sedate, and reserved. Bug-Eyed Monsters on the cover but not in noisy colors—something which has at least a touch of art somewhere in it.

Look more to layouts. For instance, the design of your cover smells—that's what is wrong with my typing. Did you ever try to type and hold your nose at the same time? The lettering is awful. If I turned out something like that my customers would shoot me. And who ever heard of a Planet dashing through the sky with a lot of red streaks behind it. Red and Green. God what a color combination! I read the story illustrated by Bok, and found it very nice, a cute idea, and handled very well. I haven't gotten into the rest of the stories for as I said before, I simply buy the mags to read the letters—and whether you believe it or not—that's the truth.

Anyway—keep going. One more, a dozen more, Science Fiction rags won't hurt us.

Thanks for listening.

GUY GIFFORD.

KINDLY SIT DOWN AND POUR YOURSELF A STORY, GENIUS

MR. GUY GIFFORD
5359 Raphael Street
Los Angeles, California

DEAR MR. GIFFORD:

I think you are as good as Asimov.

I think we should build a magazine around *you.*

As a matter of fact, your name even has certain advantages over Asimov's name. Guy Genius Gifford—G.G.G.—why it's super. Or am I mistaken? Am I wrong? Did you have your name legally changed to what the boys made it? That wouldn't look so hot.

Our poor covers! Well, this time you get a Finlay, a real Finlay! This only through great effort and persistence for Mr. Finlay is a much-in-demand artist, and I hope you guys appreciate the gesture.

While *Planet Stories* pleads guilty to the charge of being, in a cover way, somewhat sensational at times, I think you put too much value on sedateness. Too often sedateness is a full-blooded sister to dullness. Let the shooting stars shoot and the fine green monsters bug their eyes. Should *Planet* ever assume the elegant cloak of The Atlantic, what would S.F. fans have to kick about?

And by the way, Mr. Gifford, do try a few of our stories some time. They're really pretty good, some of them. Not "nice" exactly. And not "cute"—anything but "cute."

In closing I want to say thanks for the letter. The Jovian laughter was fine.

THE EDITOR.

SO THEY LAUGHED DID THEY . . . MORE FOOLS THEM!

RFD No. 2
Mt. Pleasant, Michigan

DEAR SIR:

Well sir, they laughed when I uncased the Spring issue of PS. They didn't know that beneath that utterly fantastic conglomeration of nightshirts, knights in armor, track pants, and ray guns, there beat the sterling syllables of such yarns as "Revolt on Io," and "Exiles of the Desert Star."

Somehow, "The War-Nymphs of Venus" was flat. Mr. Cummings should know better than to *tell* a story. I have seen his characters fairly scream it at me by their mere action. Characters like that don't need a writer. They tell the story themselves. (I should be telling Ray.)

"Vampire of the Void" failed for much the same reason, though I am for some reason forced to give it fourth. Perhaps it's atmosphere.

The short stories were both good and not so good. The best were "4½B, Eros" and "The Monster That Threatened the Universe." I liked Jameson's especially. This character sort of got my interest worked up. The Monster would have been better if the writer didn't try to give him a scientific explanation. Straight fantasy.

Mr. Baker deserves a bouquet for "Treasure on Triton." I have only one criticism to make to him and others who write this sort of thing. I don't like the suicide angle. Can't the guy get bumped off decent? I wonder now why he didn't make a run for it. However, I like the idea of Wolf Larsen's drinking the melted "jewel." Kinda devil-may-care like. Made me like the black devil despite all.

"Satellite of Fear" eighth. Mr. Kummer can do better. "Cosmic Derelict" comes close to being poor. I was in a terrible muddle reading it and came out stuffed with half baked science.

I have never seen Bond less than excellent except once, and that was in a monthly (with trimmed edges, so there). By all means keep him busy. (But not too busy to turn out swell detail in both characters and setting.)

The same goes for Paul, Morey, and Bok. I wish Lynch would cut out slapping rings on all his planets. The same for craters. What the devil does he do—rubber stamp them?

And now, just one more word of criticism—and this is serious. It has to do with your covers. I am actually ashamed of them. Most people just naturally judge a mag by its face. Why can't you cut out the cheap heroics? Actually there is very little science on most of your covers. An oxygen helmet, a ray gun or two, the inevitable hero and heroine. But what the hell—I'll still go on buying PS, and I guess you have to throw out a line or two to snare the comic strip readers.

I rate the letters in the Spring issue thus: Hidley, Heiner, Bridges. You know the drawings I like.

Sincerely,

JOHN LAPIN.

THE DEAD-EYE STF. FAN NEVER MISSES. SEE *

5809 Beechwood Ave.
Indianapolis, Ind.

DEAR ED.:

"'The time has come,' the Walrus said, "to speak of many things. Of shoes and ships and sealing wax—," and, more specifically, of that horrible thing that was passed off on us poor readers as the spring issue of PLANET STORIES. When I took a look at your cover I almost had heart failure (not because it was good; it wasn't), but some thoughtful soul waved a good specimen of Paul's work in my face and I snapped right out of it. Honestly, don't you agree that it was pretty poor? Of course you won't but I think it was the worst you've ever had. You can chalk up another vote for a cover by Paul or Morey in the near future.

The interior work wasn't so hot either. The three pics by Lynch—and I wish to venture the

opinion that he is *not* your best but your worst—were absolutely terrible. I heartily agree that Lynch should be lynched or, better still, sent out into space in one of his creations of, as Fred Hurtes so aptly puts it, "old oil cans, scraps of galvanized sheet iron, and odd bits of window glass." The work of Paul, Bok, and Morey was, naturally, good. Might I suggest that you have each of the three do one more drawing each, thus eliminating Lynch? No, you won't do that either. Another complaint (I'm full of 'em today). While I like Eron's work very much, I don't particularly care to see the same pic used over and over again. Get what I mean? And while we're on the subject of Eron's work, wasn't that drawing you used for "Twilight on the Tenth World" intended for "The Cosmic Derelict?" Your art department must have been either sick or drunk when this issue was set up.*

But enough of that; we now desert your art (?) for other subjects. The stories this time were just a mediocre bunch for the most part. The only ones that stood out were those by Bond, Rocklynne, and Cummings. The stories by Bond and Rocklynne because they were good; Cummings because it wasn't. The title itself was enough to scare off almost every reader, but I plunged into it. For awhile I thought the old Cummings was back again but no, it had to degenerate into his usual junk. After all, though, I shouldn't knock Cummings. It should be the editors who buy his stuff just because of the name (you can take that any way you like it. If you don't like it, cut it). As I said before, the stories by Bond and Rocklynne were good. Those by Winterbotham and Fearn were slightly interesting, and the rest were just there. All in all, the spring issue was quite a disappointment after waiting three months for it. Say, speaking of the long wait, how about going monthly? As it is, I won't be able to stand the strain much longer.

And now for a statement which will bring down threats and maledictions upon my poor head. This statement has to do with the "good old days" and is, to be brief; "there ain't no such animal!" (Cries, curses, and heartrending moans from the ranks of the good old days (daze) ers.) Perhaps a short explanation is in order, so here it is. When you first start reading science fiction there is something about it (I can't describe it) that makes it very unusual, attractive and appealing (no, that blonde who just walked past the window had nothing to do with that statement). After an indefinite period that something or other wears off, and then the reader starts to howl about "the good old days." This accounts for the somewhat varied opinions as to the exact date of "the good old days." Does that explain my statement? I hope so, anyway.

Just a few words about the three best letters. They are, in order, Bridges, Asimov's, and Hurter's.

And now my poor cramped fingers can scribble, and I *do* mean scribble, no longer. I shall now lay down my pen knowing that I have no chance whatsoever of winning an original by Paul or Morey.

Dejectedly yours,
LEONARD MARLOW.

*ED'S NOTE: The art dept. wasn't exactly drunk, unless it was power-drunk, but they certainly did switch illustrations. The "Twilight on the Tenth World" drawing had been intended for "The Cosmic Derelict." The sad fact is you can't get away with much with a SF audience.

IT WAS A FISH-BOWL ON HIS NECK

1243 Juniata Street,
North Side,
Pittsburgh, Pa.

DEAR EDITOR:

The great day had arrived. I shrugged on my jacket and settled my snood at a "just right" angle. Yes today was the day that the new issue of this wonderful magazine would be on the stands. I arrived at my drug store and snatched the book to my bosom. "Ah," I sighed, "at last the new ish of Thrilling Wonder is here; bug-eyed monster and all." But wait! What is that peeping out from behind Marvel Stories? Why it's none other than my old friend PLANET STORIES, and quickly shelled out my two dimes.

Ah, but then a glance at the cover and I turned away nauseated. That sickening mess of green mermaids, pink rocket ships, handsome hero with a fish bowl on his neck, and goon in profile on the left. Dare I wander into the god-forsaken interior? I took a chance, and a pleasant sight greeted these eyes; Paul and an oogie of an illustration. The by-line reads Ray Cummings; oh, well, we can't have everything.

Well, thought I, after concluding the last delightful bit of Kummer's "Satellite of Fear"; This mag was OK, very Okay.

Why the hell do you call a twenty-nine-page novelette a novel? Why answer me, why? The reader column was the most delightful thing I read in any of your past five issues including the stories. Originals should go to: Lynn Bridges, Chuck Hidley and Vaughn Heiner. Were I a Carl Anderson, and could toss words around; I would at once send in an epistle to PLANET STORIES, and ask for Lynch's illustration for "Satellite of Fear," or Paul's for "War Nymphs of Venus" or maybe even Sherman's pic for The Vizigraph.

Sincerely yours,
MISS KATHERINE BAUM.

Ed's. Note: Dear Lady, why shouldn't we call a 29-page novelette a novel? If you will tell us where a magazine novelette leaves off and a novel begins it will be a boon. Everyone has been trying for years to figure it out.

THIS COMES UNDER "PERSONAL"

140-92 Burden Crescent,
Jamaica, New York

DEAR EDITOR:

Aw shucks! Like Hidley, I thought that your note to my letter meant a Paul cover was coming up. But what do I see on the Spring cover? A return engagement of the hero and heroine (how about a brunette next time?) with the villain thrown in, too! Being disillusioned, I now know that your note meant the next cover would be even worse.

The stories can be summed up in these words—quantity but not quality. However, the best four of the lot are "4½B Eros," "Exiles of the Desert Star," "Revolt on Io," and "Satellite of Fear." Morey's illustrations for two of these stories, and Paul's for the first, are excellent. Why don't you—Oh-Oh! Here I am, back on the subject of that cover again!

THE VIZIGRAPH is excellent per usual. The more letters I write, the more I appreciate other people's letters. Thus the best letters in this issue are by Hidley, Heiner, and Bridges, with perhaps honorable mention to Asimov (or should I say Asenion?). So—what are you doing with that primitive instrument, Izzy? You aren't —No! Don't do it! Don't—

BILL STOY.

BOULDERS SPILL DOWN LIKE DEW-DROPS

2302 Avenue O,
Brooklyn, N. Y.

DEAR EDITOR:

On the thirty-first day of January, 1941, I became "space-sick"; delirious. I gurgled meaninglessly; hoarsely. There it was, my letter in the Vizigraph! I gulped incredulously. Not even Wolf Larson could have felt better than I did, when he had the Eye, Treasure of Triton in his possession. For, had not my critical comments been plastered on pages 126 and 127 of PS? I had a chance; a slim chance of one in ten, to be exact, of securing a picture by Lynch or Paul.

Well, in a day, I was over the worst of the astonishing shock. I settled down to read the spring issue of our mag: which makes me surer in believing that PLANET is not only the most rapidly improving mag in America; or the whole danged world (and this is no bunk, either) but the best! That is, the best as far as reading matter is concerned.

I read and observed for hours. Strongly in my mind is the fact that I should like very much to analyze the contents. "Why not?" I asked myself.

No story in the whole issue can compare with my number one choice. It rates about as good to me as "Twilight of the Tenth World" did in the last issue. The cleverly woven yarn I am referring to, is that eerie, dramatic novelet by one of my favorites, Ross Rocklynne. I mean none other than that excellent-plus tale, "Exiles of the Desert Star." The uncanny way in which Hallmeyer learned that his body was missing; the persuasive story told by The Queen That Is; the changing of Elron's atmosphere to Krypton, In Which No Organic Matter Can Live, all helped to corral Rocklynne's tale and put way up on the top of the list. Morey's pic is excellent here, and equally good in Kummer's yarn.

To say the least, "One thing strikes me as being amazing—" All tales by John R. Fearn are, to put it mildly, super-scientific bunk. But his recent stories in PLANET are wonderful; super-wonderful. The "Cosmic Derelict," though not quite as good as its forerunner, "The Cosmic Juggernaut," is super-swell. Eron's art is improving.

Nelson S. Bond has gotten out of the rut his two not-so-hot stories of last issue put him in. "Revolt on Io" is very good. The suspense, the humor and the mystery that only Bond can create was brilliantly portrayed here. Lynch was magnificent! Except for the fact that there are not three Saturns in the solar system and that Dan did not actually see the abduction of Lady Alice it was almost flawless.

"The Monster That Threatened the Universe" is a neatly told little tale that easily deserves fourth place. I have never seen really bad work by Winterbotham. Don Lynch's drawing for this yarn is the best in the issue. If (no matter how remotely possible it is) I do receive an original, I would desire this; or Paul's; or Bok's.

The best short I have even seen, was written by Neil R. Jones. I am referring to "Hermit of Saturn's Ring" in the fall issue. But Mr. Jones' present work didn't even rate half as good. "Vampire of the Void" was thoroughly a nonsensical bit of wasted space. Lynch's characters seem to live in his vivid illustration of the story.

For sixth position there is a tie between Kummer's mystery yarn, "Satellite of Fear" and Baker's ironical tale, "Treasure of Triton." The latter only achieved the position due to its remarkable climax of Larson's discovery that the Eye was only ice. Bok's pic was very fine, slightly better than Morey's.

All writers (except Ray Cummings) seem to do their masterpieces for good old PS.

In last place comes that yarn with literally nothing to its credit, Jameson's "4½ B, Eros." Who drew the picture? Rosenthal? Eron? Smalle?

Now, I know you will probably hasten this letter into the waste-paper basket because of the bricks (or should I say, boulders) I throw at some authors. But maybe if they would only try, we'd see an improvement, huh?

Hidley's letter was the best in the spring issue. And, because I am longing for that Lynch, mine was second. Bridges deserved third place.

The cover was a slight improvement over the "ousley" one in the last issue; but why, why in the stellar universe do you keep Drake? I take it he doesn't like brunettes. One issue he has a red-thatched girl; the next a blonde; the next a red; etc.

Hoping that you quietly shanghai Drake to some distant galaxy, I remain

Intergalatically (boy are space ships
improving since last issue) yours,

MILTON LESSER.

"LIKE FOURTH VICE-PRESIDENTS, COMPARE AND CRITICIZE, MOAN AND GIGGLE . . ."—Haynes

Pardeeville, Wis.

DEAR EDITOR:

In addressing this letter to you I feel somewhat as a visitor from Mars quartered in the Bronx Zoo in all probability would—in other words, not of the mob, the rank and file of PLANET STORIES readers.

I was attracted to PLANET STORIES a year and a half ago by its bold and explanatory title. Since, it has become a habit with me and is the only fantastic, or science-fiction magazine I read regularly, except one reprint. Which is the reason for my doubts about how I will be accepted: It would appear, from the letters appearing in Vizigraph, all of them, that the PLANET STORIES readers were raised from infancy on a strict diet of imaginative fiction and live on it exclusively always. They, like fourth vice-presidents, compare and criticize, moan and giggle, demand and cajole, and, it appears to me, generally end up looking ridiculous, which I too will probably do.

Regardless of what these fanatics agree upon, or disagree upon, I claim the Spring, 1941 issue to be undeniably the best yet. Maybe I am for once in a happy mood, but for the first time in six issues I found every story interesting, well writ-

ten and different. And the green cover background was excellent—I hope it will be repeated soon.

Following the established custom, but not to the usual length, I award the following blue, red and white ribbons: 1. Cummings—The War Nymphs of Venus. 2. Jones—Vampire of the Void. 3. Fearn—The Cosmic Derelict.

A definite publication date of the next issue is a big help, since this magazine never gets on the display newsstands and must be ordered in advance.

Although the present line-up of authors are doing a fine job for PLANET STORIES, I would suggest the works of a few more established authors for variation, slickness, and increased reading scope by the buying public: Kline, Farley, Beyer, Ernst, Leinster.

The best cover illustration: On No. 2 PLANET STORIES. Inside illustrations mostly good.

As for the illustration winners and all other discussions, feeling I have fully justified my expectations of making of myself an example of foolishness, I will leave that to the other readers.

With the best of wishes for a continued and increased popularity of PLANET STORIES, I remain

Sincerely yours,

STANLEY HAYNES.

PAGING DIOGENES!

1615 S. E. 43rd Ave.,
Portland, Oregon

DEAR EDITOR:

In beginning this friendly epistle, I first wish to state (1) I don't claim to have the largest science-fiction collection in the world. (2) I don't claim to have read science-fiction since 1926. (3) I don't claim that this is my first letter to any science-fiction magazine. (4) I don't claim that I am your youngest reader. (5) I am only writing this letter to get one of the illustrations.

Now for PLANET STORIES. Since its awful first issue to its excellent fifth issue, PLANET has steadily improved. The latest issue, although not as good as the one before was still excellent. Your best story was "One Thousand Miles Below," a superlative, suspensive Binder novel.

And for a few suggestions. Keep up the good art work which has improved much faster than the stories. One point though, your covers have not improved. Same old stuff. Hero saving heroine from onrushing monsters. It might be restful to see a pure bug-eyed monster cover if the girls were left out. Your inside illustrations with the better science-fiction illustration and the ones which you have developed are first rate. Lynch is one of the best newcomers to the field of fantasy.

Print some more good Rocklynne yarns. I would rate his "The Tantalus Death" as one of the three best short stories of 1940. Give the drawings to Heilman, Heiner and Asimov in that order.

Your latest issue was featured with good yarns by Rocklynne, Jameson, Winterbotham and Baker, so-so stories by Fearn, Bond, and Kummer, and poor yarns by Cummings and Jones. In finishing let me say that you have a good mag; it can be improved, so keep punching.

Cordially yours,

GILDO SALTA.

ENTER MOSKOWITZ

Springboro, Pa.

DEAR EDITOR:

Have just now finished the Spring Issue of PLANET STORIES. Half the stories are excellent —and the others are not!

Let's put Rocklynne at the head of the class; this author known as Baker (our faith in new names is destroyed, you must not use 'em—I suppose E. R. Burroughs or Fr. Coughlin wrote this) second; Winterbotham comes in tied neck and neck with Cummings for third place, and to finish off in fourth and fifth place are Bond and Kummer. The balance are stories, good enough for pulp mags but not for PLANET.

This terrible stench in my nostrils, this Darn Wrangler, . . . I turn violently blue in the face when I try to gasp out Durna Rangue. Along with neophytes, coffin baths and various other wornout plot material I vote that hereafter Jones finds one or two new plots to alternate with this one. My boy friend, a long time reader of stf—even before I married him in fact—says that Jones' first few stories appeared in the older ASTOUNDING and were enthusiastically received. I'll admit, if I never had read almost the identical story ten or twelve times already I would like "Vampire of the Void." But several thousand other readers and myself have already read his Neefy stories before and we want our old characters in *new* surroundings, with new problems.

I wonder why there are so few of the newer writers in PLANET. Of course they do not write as smoothly and their plots may be a trifle ragged but they do have ideas. Take Sam Moskowitz's latest in a competitor as an example. (Whisper . . . fans like to read a story written by one of their own, maybe they're prejudiced in his favor.) And since you receive several thousand submissions before publication from Squidgebottoms, to say nothing of Asenions, Thompsons, and Ridleys, maybe they just don't measure up. Anyhow why not ask the readers—shall we have one or two newer writers, Squidgies, in each issue, or shall we continue to be immersed in coffin baths, attended by *Venutians* from Venusian Venus, and fed on a diet of names? I might mention that *Asimov,* Don Thompson, and some of the other fans that write you, seem to handle English right well in their stories.

I've often wondered about plain covers with nothing but an illustration of a planet smeared across the stark simplicity of a brilliantly magenta-hued cover. No lettering, merely that. Or how about a checkered cover, the boys could always rip it off and play checkers, or a star-studded cover with a flaming purple background? Sorry, Mr. Heilman, I'm afraid they wouldn't go so good. Of course the covers could be better, Finlay or Paul can do right nice work, but at least no one yet has suggested you call the mag, BUGEYED STORIES. Better MELLER-DRAMMER SCIENCE than Bugeyes on the cover.

I suppose I should list the winners in the Winter letter contest, so here goes: 1. Bill Elliot, 2. Milton Lesser, 3. Heiner. I suppose I should have voted for Heilman but heck, let him draw some pictures for himself! Better than that even, was Asimov and his crocodile tears—but he can't paper his house with illustrates can he?

Sincerely,

(MRS.) MARGARET WELLS.

ED.'S NOTE: The answer to this maiden's prayer

appears on page 74. While we are naturally influenced by our readers' opinions, the Moskowitz story would have made PLANET on sheer merit.

&& + !!!=????

Lincoln, Neb.

DEAR EDITOR:

So the fans finally took pity on my feeble efforts, and voted me a picture. I'll be delighted to get it. To you, Mr. Reiss, and to the fans, many, many thanks. I decided, after some thought, that I would prefer the Paul for Binder's "One Thousand Miles Below," partly because every fan should have at least one Paul, and partly because I liked the drawing. But, if I can't get that, the Bok on page 95, illustrating Miss Brackett's "The Stellar Legion," will be very welcome.

The current issue of PS is the second best to date, I think. The Fall issue, featuring Bond's "The Ultimate Salient" is still tops. Five stories in this number are well above average, and only one falls below par. This particular story, I think, is poorly written, with a style of presentation ill-adapted to the subject. I'll not name it, however.

"Exiles of the Desert Star" is an enjoyable, thought-provoking tale, and rates first place. Rocklynne is very good at presenting the case of weak, alien peoples. "Revolt on Io" is also very good.

The cover is scarcely one to beget gasps of awed admiration, but the innovation of a *green* sea, rather than the customary purple, yellow or orange, is commendable.

The letter section is all good, making a selection difficult. I'll point my finger at Heilman, for No. 1. No. 2 goes to Heiner, with his preposterous system of rating features, pictures, and stories, all on the same scale. Rather like adding five apples plus three oranges and getting eight bananas. And, perhaps, we should give No. 3 to friend Asenion—*no!* No! not *Asenion!* Asimov! Perhaps such an award will assuage his mangled feelings, poor little feller!

Bok and Paul have good interiors, as usual. But Morey has a very fine one for "Exiles of the Desert Star," which is his first really good pic in PS. Lynch's predilection for ringed planets and for wildly-curving, million-mile-long rocket exhausts is rather spoiling the good impression of his first work.

I'd like to have any fans or near-fans in the Lincoln area look me up, or call 5-7372.

Sincerely,

D. B. THOMPSON.

WHEE—EW!

69-62 43rd Ave.
Woodside, L. I.

DEAR EDITOR:

Do you call that nightmarish sheet of paper on the front of what might be a magazine, a cover? If you do you should be in a pchycopathic institution. What does this outrage mean? Whoever slapped that cover together should be keelhauled over a rocket jet, but enough of the cover. Do you call "War Nymphs of Venus," a story? It is the most sickening bit of tripe that ever crawled out of an author's pen. "The Cosmic Derelict," is a fairly good yarn and number one on my list, followed by "Exiles of the Desert Star" and "Treasure of Triton." "Revolt on Io" makes a good fourth, after which come "4½ B, Eros," and "Satellite of Fear," in that order, last and by far least comes "Vampire of the Void."

I think that the Durna Rangue and Mr. Jones should be exiled to Pluto for the rest of their miserable lives. This is all until I choose to torment you again.

Insultingly yours,

BILL HOWELL.

P.S.—Don't take my insulting style to heart, my mother was frightened by Ned Sparks. Please pardon handwriting, I sprained my right wrist and am writing lefty.

DON'T MISS THIS ONE, EITHER

California, Pa.
225 Second St.

DEAR SIR:

I wish to take this opportunity to thank you for printing my letter in THE VIZAGRAPH of the Spring issue of PLANET STORIES. I notice that the heading that you gave my letter read: Whatever You Do, Don't Miss This. Well, I hope that those readers that might give me a vote in the competition for the original drawing, DON'T miss it.

If I don't win one of those masterpieces, is there any chance of buying them? I am interested in Bok's work. Really, I think that he is already one of the top-notchers, exceeded in ability only by Virgil Finley, who will always be the leading Fantasy illustrator. This fellow, Hunt is good. There is no doubt of that, but he can, in no way, compare to either of the above mentioned.

While I am on the subject of illustrators I may as well get it all out of my system. Paul is one of the best, this I admit. But I have one fault to find with his work: he gives us a very beautiful girl; beautiful, yes, but with half her beauty concealed by either a long cloak or dress or else he pictures her wearing some kind of a hideous costume. Why, oh why, why, why, why can't we have just one of these beauties wearing something just a little more becoming?

Lynch is swell, keep him on the semi-fantastic. His drawing for "Vampire of the Void" was one of his best.

Bok's piece depicting a scene from Baker's story, "Treasure of Triton," is top-ranking. If I am lucky enough to get one of those originals, this would be my first choice. Bok's illustration for Brackett's story, "The Stellar Legion," in the winter issue was one which I would like to have even if I have to buy it. For sale? Or did Hidley or one of the others get it?

Of your other artists, I haven't much to say.

And now for the cover: It was swell. You did right, for a change, when you illustrated the feature piece. Stay with this policy, and you and I will get along fine on this count.

Dan Heilman suggests that the cover title be printed on a solid background—well, why not? This is revolutionary, I admit, but still, it is just the thing for us collectors. Most of your readers probably keep each issue of the mag. Those that do will advocate the solid background I'm sure. How about it, fellows, want to push this idea?

Well, THE VIZIGRAPH was top-ranking again so I'll leave it out of the rating line-up this time.

First on the list comes the feature novel "The War-Nymphs of Venus." My old favorite came to the front this time with one of the best yarns I have seen in PLANET. We had a little of most everything in this issue's story. The love interest, space travel, adventure and one thing that I like, the "good-egg" bad-man.

Second place goes to Bok for the wonderful drawing mentioned above. This is one of Bok's best.

Third award to Paul for his piece fronting Cummings' novel.

Fourth: 4½ B, Eros. Of this story, I didn't much like the plot, but it was so well put together, that I am forced to give it this place on the list.

Jones' story, "Vampire of the Void." A yarn neatly done. No hairy-chested heroes nor weeping ladies; just a poor love-deluded male and a female disintegrating ray. A swell tale from the pen of a good writer; more of Jones. This story cops fifth.

Sixth: "Revolt on Io." Bond fell down on this one a little. It was good and I enjoyed every word of it, but it didn't quite come up to the regular style of this writer.

Seventh: "Exiles of the Desert Star." Merely pretty good. Come on, Ross, you can do better than this.

Eighth: "The Monster That Threatened the World": I don't really know just what to say of this story. It was different, there is no getting away from that, but I didn't like the moral angle. Stories with a personal moral are all right in their place, but that place is not between the covers of a Stf. mag.

Ninth: "The Cosmic Derelict." No comment.

"Treasure of Triton." Tenth place to this one. Not so hot.

Last, with a capital "L," comes "Satellite of Fear." And that does it. I hope that some small percentage of the readers agree with me, anyhow.

Incidentally, please put my votes on the list for the following in the order named. Hidley. (Yes, again the first vote goes to this fellow.) Hurter and Elliott.

Well, if this sees print, I don't know if I'll get to read the issue in which it appears or not. You see, I always turn to the VIZIGRAPH before leaving the newsstand, and if I should happen to see this, I would probably fall over in a swoon. Don't let this possible tragedy hinder you from printing this, though, for I can use and appreciate all of those originals that may come my way. I have had an offer from a friend who wants the spring Bok that he says I am going to win. Isn't that a laugh? As though I would ever think of selling one of them were I lucky enough to get one.

Well, I guess if you have waded through this to this point, you are about ready to quit, so before you do, I will.

Yours hopefully,
VAUGHAN RALF HEINER.

HEILMAN VS. JORDAN: ROUND ONE

382 N. Crystal St.
Elgin, Illinois.

DEAR EDITOR:

Who does this guy Heilman think he is, asking you to print incredible tales on a solid background? Why if you did that how many people would buy your magazine? Take me for instance; I saw your mag from clear out on the street. It aroused my curiosity—I went in—looked at it—and finally bought it. If he don't like to be seen carrying one home why does he buy 'em?

I'm hoping for an original Lynch drawing. Preferably the illustration for "Revolt on Io." However, this is the first time I've ever written to any stf magazine, and this probably won't even get in the Vizigraph.

What dya say to a few more time traveling tales—hey?

Yours truly,
BOB JORDAN.

COMRADES, UNITE!

7063 Ohio Avenue,
Silverton, Ohio

DEAR EDITOR:

I was very happy to hear from you a la epistle this morning, and I feel quite honored to think that you considered my belated letter worthy of publication in the next PLANET. I am anxiously looking forward to its publication. I have been a silent fan for years, and only lately have started pestering the editors of fantasy mags, so it would be quite an honor to me to have my first letter to your fine magazine win an original illustration. Thanks a million for your wishes.

I think I mentioned in my last letter that I was an aspiring fantasy artist. I was particularly inspired by the Burroughs' Mars tales, which I have read over and over again. When I first "discovered" John Carter, I used to sit by the hour and draw my impressions of Woola, Tars Tarkas, Xodar, etc., and my impressions of such beasts as zitidars, thoats, apts, white apes. Perhaps that is the reason ERB has always been my favorite author and J. Allen St. John my favorite illustrator.

Getting around to Inglethorpe Squidgebottom, I have contacted this noteworthy author, and he has condescended to submit a story for your consideration. However, he informs me, he is a high-class author, and will accept not one iota less than 37c per story. He has been hiding in a state of complete seclusion since the editor of GRUESOME TALES asked Squidgebottom to pay GT for printing a story of his.

I was very interested in your comments on simplicity in stf covers, and I absolutely agree with everything you say. An editor, no matter how ingenious and broadminded he may be, could never hope to please all the fans if he sweated until eternity. Except for the glory-seekers, the fans who write all kinds of insipid drivel in the hopes that their names will appear in print, there are no two stf fans who think alike. All of them (including myself) have countless likes and dislikes, both large and small which they would have the editors acknowledge. All of them can't be satisfied, so the logical thing to do is to appeal to the masses. You know . . . in Union There Is Strength and all that stuff. I haven't seen any other kicks than mine about the lettering on your cover, and could the truth be known, I don't dislike the cover at all. It's a darned fine cover, so to heck with my suggestion, eh?

Well, I don't think I have anything else to say, lest it be "Best wishes for continued success with your excellent magazine . . . just keep up to the good standard you have set, and I'll be completely satisfied."

Yours very truly,
DANN HEILMAN.

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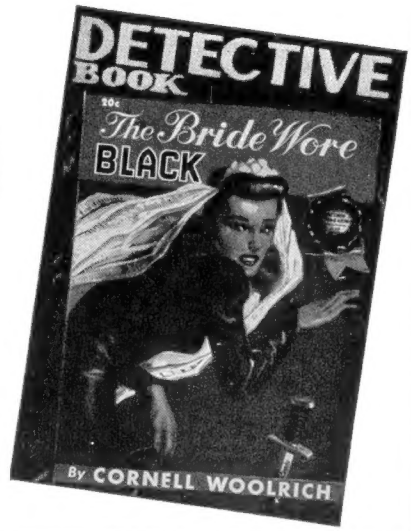

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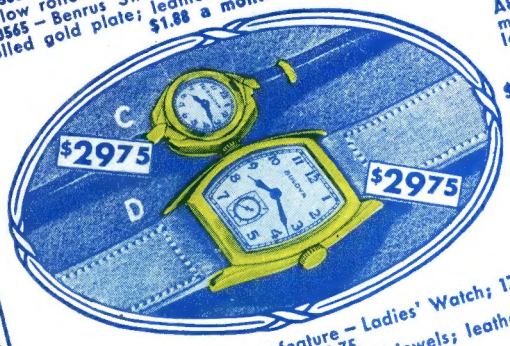

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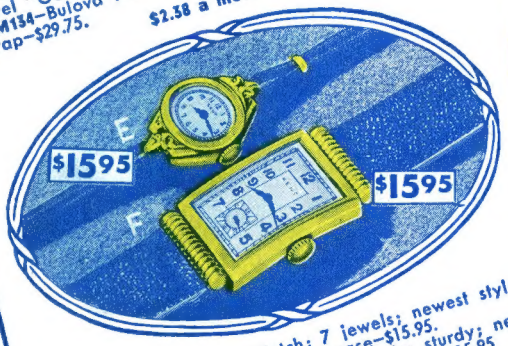

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